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Bright about his business...

DUMB about his Dandruff!

Pityrosporum ova the strange "bot bacillus" regarded many leading auth ities as a causat agent of infecti dandruff.

Don't Ignore Nature's Warning! It may be the Infectious Type!

Funny, isn't it, that the man who overlooks nothing when it comes to getting ahead in business, and who gets upset about the slightest rattle in his motor, is often the same bird who pooh-poohs that telltale shower of flakes and scales on his coat shoulder?

The first thing he knows he may be in for a mean and troublesome case of infectious dandruff...*and can it be mean and troublesome!*

Listerine Antiseptic—Quick!

Don't scorn Nature's warnings! Persistent flakes and scales and itching often indicate the presence of infectious dandruff. Get started at once with Listerine Antiseptic and fingertip massage... the easy, delightful home treatment that has helped so many. It tackles an infectious problem as infections should be tackled—with antiseptic action.

Make it a part of your regular shampoo and, if you do not see rapid improvement, follow the treatment twice a day, or oftener. T same treatment, used twice a day in clinic tests, brought complete disappearance of, marked improvement in, symptoms of dandr to 76% of dandruff sufferers within 30 day

Kills "Bottle Bacillus"

Listerine Antiseptic gives scalp and hair a co antiseptic bath which kills millions of germ including the stubborn "bottle bacillus".

This tough, hard-to-kill customer is look upon by many a noted dermatologist as causative agent of infectious dandruff.

You'll be delighted when you see how ra idly those embarrassing flakes and scales beg to disappear. Your scalp feels better... yo hair looks better... all without grease, mes fuss or bother. Listerine is the same antisept that has been America's standby for oral h giene for over 60 years.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY, *St. Louis, M*

the tested treatment **LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC** *and* **MASSAGE**

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All in favor raise right hands . . . *with wallets*

Naturally we want our boys home.

But how much are we willing to do about it?

Are we willing to pay for bringing them back? If we are, we'll buy *extra* Bonds in the Victory Loan.

And after these fellows get home—what then?

We want to take care of the injured ones, of course. We want to give our boys a chance to finish their education. We want to see that there are plenty of decent jobs for them.

How much are we willing to do about that?

If we're really serious about wanting to see that our men get what they have so richly earned, we'll buy *extra* Bonds in the Victory Loan.

Now's the time. Let's have a show of hands—with wallets—to prove how much we really want to hear that familiar voice yelling "It's *me!*" Let's prove, with pocketbooks, that we can do our job as well as they did theirs.

THEY FINISHED THEIR JOB—
LET'S FINISH OURS!

VICTORY LOAN

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC.

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WESTERN STORY

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JULY, 1946 VOL. CCXV, NO. 3

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JOHN BURR

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COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

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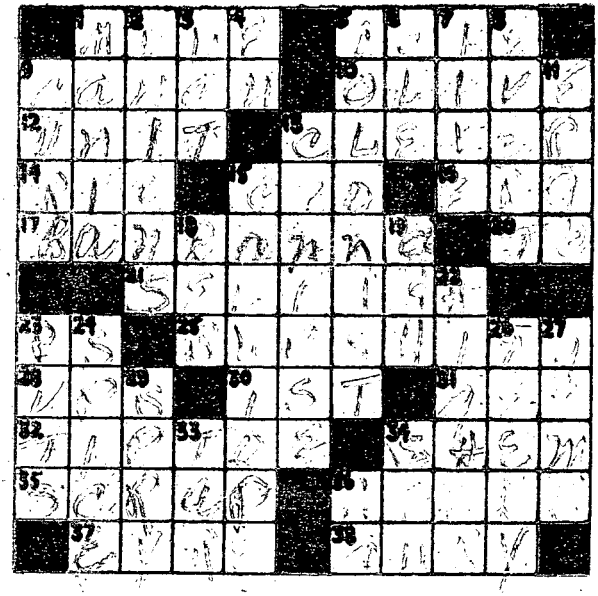
CROSSWORD PUZZLE



ACROSS

1. Pack animal
5. Coffee eathouse
9. Deep valley or gorge
10. California fruit
12. Single thing
13. Smart
14. River: Spanish
15. Pigeon call
16. Unit of work
17. Cowboy handkerchief
20. Sign of the infinitive
21. Heedless of others
23. Something added to a letter
25. Turning red-faced
28. Life's high spots
30. Suffix indicating the follower of a doctrine
31. Opposite of "haw"
32. Standing as high as possible
34. Eldest son of Noah
35. Tussle
36. Pays attention to
37. Jane ——, by Charlotte Brontë
38. Askew

DOWN

1. A craze
2. Labor groups
3. Parcel of land
4. Half an em
5. Pioneer settler
6. Creamy brew
7. Basketball team
8. To turn outward
9. Chain attached to a horse's bit
11. Therefore
13. Befuddle
15. Musical instrument of circus parades
18. Young society girl
19. Sturdy tree
22. Nearer the top
23. Sets in place
24. Pungent flavoring
26. Poor
27. Jewels
29. Active
33. Sailor
34. Tailor
36. Laugh

(The solution to this puzzle may be found on page 114)

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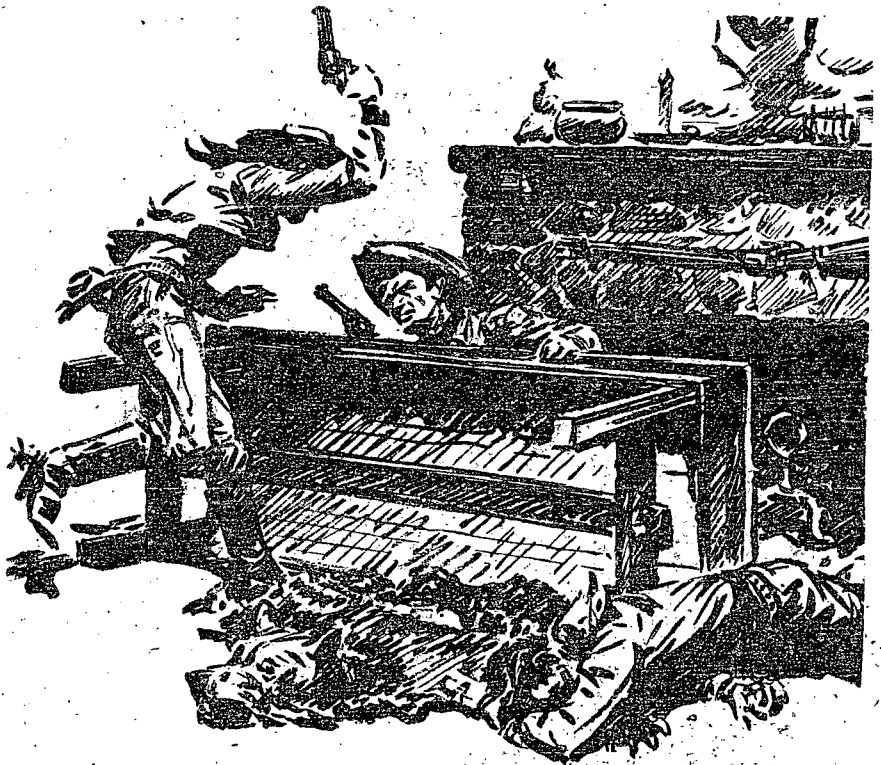
SLEEPER SID'S TALLY

by WALT COBURN



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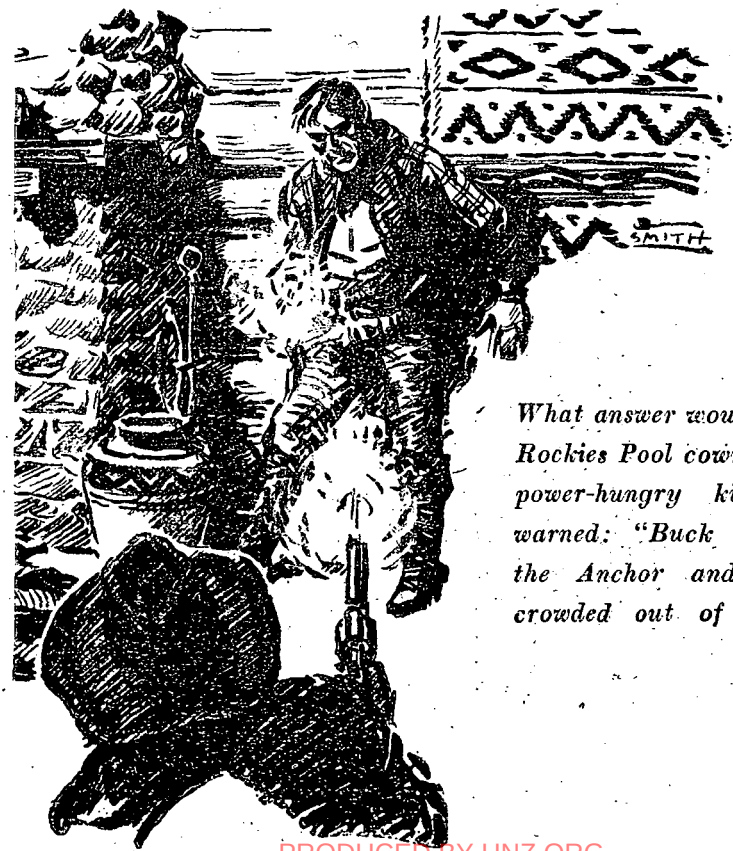
I

It was the first week of the fall roundup and the Little Rockies Pool was building a beef herd and also branding any calves the calf roundup had missed last spring. Loney Howard, who was running the wagon, was now dragging calves to the branding fire.

His weight in one stirrup, Loney dragged a big "sleeper-marked" calf by both hind legs. There was a faint grin on his lean, square-jawed, blunt-nosed face and a hard bright twinkle in the gray eyes that were set under heavy black brows. His voice was slow and lazy as he called out to big Red Fancher who was handling the branding irons.

"Another un of Sleeper Sid's!" There was the hint of a chuckle in Loney's voice. "You kin stamp your hot iron on his hide, Fancher. I ketched him a-follerin' an Anchor cow."

The two rasslers took the big bawling calf and one of them yanked the



What answer would the Little Rockies Pool cowmen give the power-hungry kingpin who warned: "Buck range with the Anchor and you'll be crowded out of Montana!"

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loop off its hind legs. Loney Howard let his sweating horse blow for a minute while he coiled his catch rope.

Red Fancher, at his best, was not an amiable man. He had been born, perhaps, with an ingrown ornery disposition, or had managed to acquire a mean streak that he kept whetted sharp-edged as his jackknife. He was big and tough and he worked at it. Heavy-jawed, he had a splayed nose and small pale-blue eyes. The reddish whiskers on his face and the hair that grew on his thick red bull neck were as wiry as the sorrel bristles on a boar. He spat a stream of tobacco juice as he picked a stamp branding iron from the fire with one big gloved hand.

Red Fancher was one of the dozen small cattlemen who formed the Little Rockies Pool. But the rumor was that Fancher was selling his outfit to the big Anchor Cattle Co. And right now, in addition to gathering his own RF (connected) cattle, Red Fancher was repping for the Anchor. He was taking his rep job almighty serious, thus adding weight to the rumor that he was about to take over the highly paid job of ramrodding the Anchor.

Powdery dust puffed up as Fancher's brown tobacco spittle sprayed the ground. He looked up at Loney Howard. The Pool ramrod dropped his coiled rope over his saddlehorn and reached for the tobacco and cigarette papers in his shirt pocket. He had had a hunch what was coming when he dragged the big sleeper-marked calf to the branding fire.

"That damned old cattle-thievin' son—" Red Fancher had a rasping voice—"is about to run 'is luck out. One of these days—and it won't be long—Sleeper Sid Gibbons is goin' to have it told to him by a law judge that it's agin' the Montana law to go whittlin' the ears of other men's calves. The thievin' ol' rascal will git about ten-fifteen years in the pen to think 'er over."

Loney Howard pulled a match head across his thigh, held the hand-cupped flame to his cigarette and then blew it out with his first deep drag of smoke.

Sid Gibbons got his nickname from his long habit of roaming the range alone. When he saw a big calf somewhere in the badlands that might get overlooked on the roundup, the grizzled cowman would shake a loop in his catch rope, rope the calf, earmark it, using his own earmark that was the swallow-fork mark on both ears, then turn it loose. And if no man's brand was burned on the hide of that earmarked critter after weaning time, old Sid might ride up on it, rope it and burn his Half Circle G on its hide. This sort of earmarking came under the head of range trickery and could be called cattle rustling. The name for it was "sleeper marking." And hence the nickname "Sleeper Sid."

It was a wide-open range secret and nobody bothered to do anything about it. The roundups watched for these sleeper-marked calves, branded each one in the iron on the hide of its mother and passed it off with a josh. That part of the Montana cow country had known Sleeper Sid when

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he ran a lot of cattle and had his own big range and ran his own roundup wagon.

That was when Sid Gibbons' Half Circle G was one of the bigger cow outfits before the hard winter of '86-'87 had wiped him out. Loney Howard referred to it as the winter that froze Sid Gibbons' brain. And for the most part the cow country had only a sort of grim pity and tolerance for Sleeper Sid and his habit, because it was not straining anybody's memory much to recall a lot of generous things Sid Gibbons had done throughout the long years. And even now Sleeper Sid did his best.

The big Anchor had somehow managed to grab off most of Sid Gibbons' old Half Circle G range, leaving the grizzled cattleman no more than his old home ranch at the south end of the Little Rockies, a string of good saddle horses, a few work teams and a handful of cattle in his Half Circle G iron.

It was one of the best small ranches in the cow country. Hay meadows straddled a creek that never went dry. There was more hay than Sleeper Sid could feed his own stuff of a long winter. So he would ride out, "rawhiding" during the winter, fetching home some weak cow with a calf born out of season. He would feed the cow and save the calf, feed anything that looked as though it wouldn't winter, regardless of whose brand it wore and turn it loose when the grass came the next spring. He did it with never a word to anybody, asking no payment, expecting no thanks. The cow country knew that Sleeper Sid Gibbons wintered free of charge a lot more cattle than ever he sleeper-marked with his swallow-fork left and right earmarks. And amen to that.

Sleeper Sid, the past years, had always worked along with the Little Rockies Pool roundup, fetching his packed bed horse and string of cow horses. And because there was no better beef man on earth, Loney Howard would put Sleeper Sid in charge of the beef herd.

Sleeper Sid was tending the branding fire now, keeping the irons hot. A leathery little old stoop-shouldered, bowlegged man with a drooping white mustache, thick snow-white hair and puckered sky-blue eyes, he had a slow-grin and a soft voice and he lived in a dim sort of past. His life had faded away and reality was dimmed for Sid Gibbons. To men who had known him before the hard winter, Sleeper Sid was no more than the living ghost of Sid Gibbons of the Half Circle G.

It was Loney Howard who had saved Sid Gibbons from freezing to death the spring of '87 when the cattleman had ridden out alone into the last blizzard of the hard winter. The last of his hay had been fed sparingly to his remuda of horses and the snowdrifts shrouded the bones and hides of his Half Circle G cattle. He was wiped out . . . .

Loney Howard was only about eighteen at the time. He had the little ranch on Bull Creek left to him by his dead father. He had wintered alone and was feeding his little bunch of horses from his last stack of wild hay when he sighted a

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saddle horse standing head down and rump to the storm at the closed gate. It was Sid Gibbons' horse. Sid had pulled off the bridle. Get lost in a blizzard and pull off the bridle and maybe your horse will take you home. . . .

But Sid Gibbons had not been in the saddle. Loney had back-trailed into the icy blast of the blizzards to dig the cowman, more frozen than alive, from a deep snowdrift. Half an hour later he would have been buried there until the warm Chinook wind melted the drifts. Both Loney's ears were frozen and he had barely made it back to his ranch alive with Sid Gibbons roped to his saddle.

When the storm had let up and travel was possible, Loney had ridden the twenty miles to the Half Circle G home ranch to take the news to Sid's family.

It was little Susan Gibbons who came to the door in answer to Loney's pounding. Fourteen then, she had heavy black hair with shining coppery-red highlights, plaited in squaw braids. Her eyes were a deep dark blue under thick black lashes. But her eyelids were swollen and red from weeping.

"Tell your maw, Sue, that I got Sid at my place," Loney said. "He got frost bit some but he's thawin' out."

"Mama is dead, Loney. Didn't papa tell you?"

"No. . . . I reckon he kind o' forgot. If you got nothin' else to do, mebbyso you better ride back to my place with me. Reckon Sid could stand some lookin' after for awhile."

Sid Gibbons' wife had died of pneumonia. Sid had picked and shoveled a grave in the frozen ground and buried his wife there, the day he had ridden out alone in the last blizzard of the hard winter. And it was then that young Loney Howard knew that he had saved the life of a man who had wanted to die.

Susan Gibbons had gone back with Loney. And long after the warm Chinook wind cut away the drifts to lay bare the brown hills and prairie covered with the dead carcasses of cattle and horses and a few men, Susan stayed there and nursed her father. Loney had fetched them what clothes and bedding they needed and moved his own tarp-covered roundup bed to the barn. And the grass was green and high in the coulees when Sid Gibbons and Susan rode back to the Half Circle G home ranch.

"You're a good man, Loney," Sid Gibbons had smiled. "Your father was a good man before you. We come up the trail together. . . . I want you to ramrod my outfit, son. You'll run the Half Circle G wagon when it comes time to begin the calf roundup. I'll be lookin' fer you to show up in a day or two." His voice was soft, his puckered eyes as blue as the clear Montana sky.

Sid Gibbons had forgotten that his big Half Circle G outfit had been wiped out by the hard winter. He had been like that ever since. And that was ten years ago.

Now he puttered around the branding fire, feeding it, watching the branding irons heat to a cherry red. He comprehended only very

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dimly what was being said about him.

There were a dozen or more men there. That many more out yonder holding the herd. And with few exceptions, they would take the part of Sleeper Sid. But it was Loney Howard's deal and they watched him and big tough Red Fancher.

Loney Howard broke the stem of the sulphur match and when he spoke, the tobacco smoke drifted out with his voice.

"You might be just runnin' off at the head, Fancher, because you like the noise you make. If I figgered you meant what you said—"

"You're damned right I mean it." Fancher spat again. "Not only that, but you buy so much as one dirty white chip in the game and you'll be in the Deer Lodge pen along with Sleeper Sid, makin' purty horsehair bridles fer to be raffled off fer tobacco money. You kin send a horsehair prison bridle to that high-chinned schoolmarm Susan Gibbons at Landusky. . . ."

Loney Howard gigged his horse with spurs, covering the short distance to big Red Fancher in two sudden jumps. The half-smoked brown-paper cigarette still hung from a corner of his flat-lipped grin as he swung a long leg up over his saddlehorn and quit his horse with a deft flying leap.

Red Fancher swung the hot branding iron at Loney's head. Loney ducked and the heavy red-hot iron seared the top of his shoulder. He landed straddle of the big man's chest and shoulders with a crashing thud that sent Fancher reeling backwards. Loney rode the big tough Anchor man to the ground. The hot branding iron flailed wildly, down across the Pool wagon boss' back and flanks, searing and scorching and burning through cloth to the hide beneath.

The branding, burning blows only goaded Loney on. Fancher's hat had been knocked off and Loney got a fistful of the big man's thick, sweat-matted hair. Twisting Fancher's head back, Loney doubled his other hand into a white-knuckled fist and drove short, powerful punches into the big man's face, battering the splayed nose till the blood spurted, blinding the small, bloodshot pale-green eyes. The heavy branding iron kept flailing and burnt Loney's back and rump with every wild blow. And Loney crouched over on the top of the bigger man, gripping with saddle-muscled thighs as though he was straddling a pitching bronc. And he smashed those short, vicious jabs into the beefy face until Fancher's bellowing curses choked off and the big Anchor rep begged for mercy.

Somebody kicked the hot branding iron from Fancher's grip before little old Sleeper Sid could grab the hot end of the branding iron in his ungloved gnarled hands. One of the Pool men pulled the bewildered old cowman back from the ruckus.

Loney Howard twisted the big Anchor man's battered, blood-smeared, red-whiskered face into the thick dust, rubbed his head into the dirt. Then he let go and told

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Fancher to get up out of the dirt and onto his feet.

II

Loney's sweat-marked faded blue flannel shirt was scorched and the burnt holes smoldered at the edges. A cowpuncher picked up the bucket of drinking water and the big tin dipper and sloshed dippersful of the creek water on the lanky wagon boss' shirt and undershirt, and the burnt places on the seat of his faded denim Levi pants. Loney managed a painful sort of grin.

"I'll be ridin'," he panted, "standin' in my stirrups. . . . Git up on your hind laigs, Fancher. I ain't done yet."

But the big Anchor rep had had enough fighting. He got to his hands and knees, then pulled himself onto his feet.

"Ride on to camp," Loney told him, "an' cut your string of Anchor horses. We'll gather and ship your RF and Anchor beef and brand anything follerin' an RF or Anchor cow. Don't be at camp when I git there or I'll double a wet rope and whup you off."

"I'll come back." Red Fancher waited until he had mounted his horse before he spoke and he spat blood and tobacco juice with every word. "I'll come back. There'll be a law badge pinned on my shirt. And I'll have bench warrants fer you and fer Sleeper Sid Gibbons."

"Better fetch yourself a big posse to back that kind of a play," said one of the cowmen who made up the Little Rockies Pool.

Red Fancher snarled something and rode away, headed for the roundup camp. Loney Howard scowled after him. The half dozen burns on Loney's back were commencing to give him pain.

The two calf rasslers still held down the big sleeper-marked calf.

"Hot iron here!" grinned one of them. "We'd orter put this un in the Half Circle G, fer the hell of it."

"No use furnishin' that big crooked son with ammunition," the other calf rassler said. "Burn a big Anchor on this thing, somebody. And be sure to whittle these sleeper-marked ears to the Anchor crop, right and left, even if you got to cut both ears off to the short nubbin. The new Anchor ramrod ain't a-funnin', Loney. You kin gamble on that."

Loney nodded. Sleeper Sid's voice sounded, soft and mild, at his elbow.

"I don't know what the rookus was about, son. But that big ox shore branded you. Bakin' sody's good fer to take the sting an' pizen out o' burns. You ride on to camp and the cook will fix you up. I'll

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jigger this spread till you git back."

Loney forced a grin and shook his head. "I'm all right, Sid."

He swung up on his horse and rode back towards the little bunch of cows and calves, shaking a loop into shape. He heeled a big calf and dragged it to the branding fire, a hard bright glint in his gray eyes.

"Another un of Sleeper Sid's. Mammyless. . . . Put this heifer thing in the Half Circle G."

"Hot iron!" bawled one of the pair of calf rasslers.

Loney Howard was keeping tally. He took the little tally book and stub pencil from his shirt pocket and marked it down as he rode back for another calf.

Sweat stung the raw burns on his back and rump. But the pain served to clear his brain, helped him think.

That had been no idle threat. Red Fancher had just let slip the spoken clincher to a lot of ugly rumors that had spread across the Montana cattle country like a prairie fire. The Anchor outfit had hired big Red Fancher for a ramrod.

Fancher would ride straight to the Anchor home ranch. The Anchor roundup had not commenced. Red Fancher would take the wagon and would lead long circles across the Anchor boundaries. And there were some new cowhands hired out to the Anchor. Hard-bitten, grim-jawed, cold-eyed cowhands who had drifted up out of the Wyoming country and hired out for fighting wages. They all packed six-shooters. There would be saddle carbines and cartridges in the Anchor bed wagon. Red Fancher would wear a special deputy sheriff law badge pinned to his shirt. The Anchor was big enough and wielded enough political power to pin a law badge on its ramrod.

The Anchor was owned by a syndicate, half a dozen wealthy men back East. And one man out of that half dozen was a "retired" cattleman named Cass Blackstone who was quietly and ruthlessly forcing his business partners out. Slowly but very surely, Cass Blackstone was gaining full control and sole ownership of the Anchor Cattle Co. And just as cunningly and ruthlessly Cass Blackstone was beginning to extend the far boundaries of the Anchor range.

While the elder Cass Blackstone played it like a game of high-stake freeze-out poker back in Chicago, his only son, Cass Blackstone Junior, had been sent to Montana to take over the management of the Anchor Ranch.

Little Cass, they called him. But there was nothing little about him. He was a six-footer and he had the wide shoulders, lean flanks and long, hard-muscled legs of an athlete. Nor was he any kind of a dude or pilgrim at the cattle-ranching business. Since he was big enough to straddle a pony, he had spent his school vacations on the ranch. Winters, Little Cass got the benefit of an education. He had had four years of college, majoring in agriculture and the breeding and raising of livestock. And now, still a year on the younger side of thirty, he had every available acre of pasture fenced and in alfalfa and under irrigation. And

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he had the finest Hereford bulls and young cows that money could buy, fattening in pens, feed lots and big high-fenced pastures.

Little Cass had hair the color of new rope. His eyes were pale grayish-green and as cold as deep ice. He had a hawk-beaked nose and a long jaw that tapered to a blunt point and he kept his small mustache trimmed and twisted at the ends to waxed points. His shirts and riding pants were tailored and he wore the legs of his buckskin-foxed pants folded into the fancy-stitched tops of shop-made boots. But the tinhorn gamblers who mistook Little Cass Blackstone for a dude and easy pickings learned differently, and the costly way.

Little Cass was a born gambler. He kept his long-fingered hands protected by buckskin gloves whenever he was outside the house. He wore an ivory-handled six-shooter openly in a carved holster and he packed a second gun in an arm-pit holster under his shirt.

"Keep out of trouble," the elder Cass Blackstone told his only son. "If somebody needs killing, turn the job over to Red Fancher. Keep your hands clean."

Unnecessary advice to a son who was a highly polished chip from the cold steel wedge. Little Cass had inherited all his father's ruthless traits. Education had served the purpose of honing and whetting and polishing the sharp-cutting steel.

Little Cass treated big Red Fancher with contempt. He gave Fancher his orders the way he would order a savage dog to heel. And Red Fancher hated the guts of Little Cass Blackstone but was mighty, mighty careful not to reveal that hatred. He took the vicious flick of Little Cass' tongue lashings with an almost oafish humility. And in his heart he made himself a promise to kill Little Cass sometime. Not openly. Not to be caught and found guilty of Little Cass Blackstone's murder. But from ambush and so it would appear to be the bushwhacking revenge of somebody like Loney Howard. . . .

Loney sensed that and had warned himself against it. Until now he had managed to sidestep or walk around or ride past anything that looked like trouble with the Anchor outfit.

"Sell out," Little Cass Blackstone had sent out notice to Loney Howard and every other small rancher in the Little Rockies Pool. "Put a price on your outfit. If it's fair, the Anchor will buy it, cash on the barrelhead. Buck range with the Anchor and you'll get crowded out of Montana."

Not that Little Cass put it in black and white or added the sound of his flat-toned voice to a word of it. He was too cunning for that. He sent the notice by Red Fancher. And big Red was only too glad to tell it scarey to Loney Howard and the other cowmen who made up the Little Rockies Pool.

"Let Sleeper Sid Gibbons alone, Fancher," Little Cass had told the big man.

And big Red Fancher had passed that along to Loney Howard for just

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whatever he figured it might be worth, adding his own interpretation of Little Cass Blackstone's big-hearted leniency.

"Little Cass has his loop built fer Sleeper Sid's purty little schoolmarm daughter. He ain't goin' to rile her up by kickin' her old man off his ranch. No siree. Little Cass is a top hand at that game. He throws a neat loop. And he don't swing it wide enough to ketch on no fence post."

Whiskey talk. But plenty of truth in it. Big Red Fancher spoke with a bitter rankling hatred for a man like Little Cass who had the handsome looks and college education and the wealth and cattleman's power to impress any girl. Little Cass, only son of Big Cass Blackstone who was stealing the Anchor outfit to hand down to his son and heir, had a way with women. Every girl old enough to look at a man had her eye on Little Cass Blackstone and the most of them made no bones about it. Even Susan Gibbons.

Sue must have felt flattered by the attention Little Cass paid her. She had something of a higher education herself. She and Little Cass could talk the same language. He gave her books to read. Books that a cowhand like Loney Howard did not know how to read with any sort of real savvy. And at a dance, Little Cass surely made cowpunchers like Loney look clumsy and uncouth.

Loney Howard had big-brothered little Sue Gibbons since he could remember. She didn't know, and Loney hoped she never would find out, that it was actually his money that had made it possible for her to get enough college education to enable her to pass her schoolteacher's examination. Sue had come to Loney the way she would have gone to an older brother.

"Guess what, Loney!" Her cheeks were flushed with excitement. "Little Cass says he's in love with me."

"Little Cass," Loney had spoken too quickly, "is bad medicine."

Sue had let out a little gasp, as though he had slapped her face. Then anger had blazed in her black-lashed blue eyes and her fists doubled as though she was going to tear into him the way she used to do when they were kids together and he teased her. But those kid days were past and gone forever. Susan had whirled around and walked away. And since then she had never mentioned the name of Little Cass Blackstone to Loney Howard.

That had been over a year ago. And Sue no longer rode over to Loney Howard's ranch on Bull Creek for Sunday picnics, bringing him a cake or half a dozen pies and taking home a war sack filled with his dirty shirts to be returned the next Sunday, laundered and mended. And so Sue Gibbons and Loney Howard had drifted apart. Nothing much remained of their old companionship. And it was Little Cass who took the pretty Landusky schoolmarm to all the dances and rode home with her on horseback at sunrise.

Now Loney Howard had just whipped big Red Fancher because Fancher had mentioned Susan Gibbon's name. He had run off the

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big Anchor rep. Fancher would have his own particular version of it all rehearsed by the time he reached the Anchor home ranch. He would tell it in his own way to Little Cass. Little Cass, in turn, would believe as much of it as he wanted to swallow. But he would twist it into shape and use it to his best Little Cass-Anchor advantage and it gave him another weapon to use against Loney Howard and the Little Rockies Pool he had set out to smash.

The brands on Loney's back throbbed with pain but he did not ride to camp until the work was done. The cook said that Red Fancher had packed his bed on a pack horse and pulled out, cutting his string of Anchor horses from the remuda.

III

The men who owned stock in the Anchor Cattle Co. had had a Chicago architect and builder draw up the plans and erect the big log ranchhouse. It had a big living room, a smaller dining room, a spacious kitchen and half a dozen small bedrooms paired off, three on each side of a hallway. There were hardwood floors and a small wood stove in each bedroom. The big living room had a huge native granite rock fireplace, a well-stocked bar and Navajo and bearskin Indian-tanned rugs. Trophy heads of elk and mountain sheep were mounted and hung on the walls. The massive furniture was handmade of hardwood and rawhide.

The ranchhouse was called the hunting lodge. The stockholders came out each year to hunt big game. They drank a lot of excellent whiskey and their high-stake poker games lasted all night or all week. And when they took the train back East to their city homes and wives and families, it was always Cass Blackstone who had come out ahead on poker winnings. Always. And the winnings ran well into five figures.

And at the stockholders' meetings where Cass Blackstone Senior presided, they went over the Anchor books. The June meeting, at the end of the hard winter of '86-'87, had been gloomy. The Anchor loss in livestock was appalling. The last twenty-five carloads of hay shipped there had cost a hundred dollars a ton plus mule-team freight from the railroad to the headquarters ranch.

The stockholders were ready to sell out then for a rock-bottom price but Big Cass Senior did not have even that amount of ready money to buy them out. He had to talk them into throwing a lot more money into the Anchor jackpot to save their original investment. Their only hope was to restock the blizzard-gutted range. Big Cass finally argued them into it. But after ten years the stockholders were getting weary of being told that the profits had to go back into the outfit to keep it running. Big Cass finally had them where he wanted them. They were ready to quit.

"I'm tired of listening to your eternal bellyaching," he told them. "You're a pack of sorry losers at poker. You can't take the bad with the good in the cattle business. I'll

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buy you out—at my figure. Take it or leave it."

They took it. They called it robbery, said Cass Blackstone was a damned pirate. They accused him of scuttling their ship. But they sold out to him at his figure. When the deal was closed, Big Cass Senior caught the next train for Montana.

Big Cass was at the Anchor headquarters ranch when Red Fancher rode in from the Little Rockies Pool roundup. And he was in an ugly temper. Little Cass had not met him at Chinook where he had gotten off the train though he had wired his son a week ago to expect him and to meet him with a rig. He had to hire a livery team to fetch him home and there was no sign of Little Cass at the ranch, either. The Chinaman said mebbyso boss-man Little Cass was at Landusky. Missy Susan. Schoolhouse lady. Ketchum kiss. Big Cass Senior was fit to be tied. He gulped down a big slug of raw whiskey and stalked like some big silver-tip grizzly towards the barn.

"But you told me to strap on some hardware."

Big Cass was a huge man. Paunchy, his rawhide muscle aged to hard, solid meat and fat. But his jutting hawk beak, his hard pale gray-green eyes, flat-lipped mouth and underslung jaw belonged to a cold-blooded ruthless fighter.

Red Fancher recognized Big Cass the second he sighted him coming from the lodge. And Fancher's belly crawled with cold clammy fear. Facing Cass would be an ordeal and there was no running away. Red had tried that years ago and Big Cass had found him and hauled him back and thrown him down on a little ranch at the edge of the Anchor range, told him to squat there and take orders, or he'd be sent back to the Texas pen where he belonged or hung by a hangman's rope.

Big Cass halted on widespread legs, scowling, staring at the badly battered face of Red Fancher while the burly foreman shifted uneasily in his saddle.

Then Big Cass Blackstone's head tilted back and his hard eyes squinted to slits and he let out a big, bellowing laugh. He laughed until his hard paunch quivered. Then he stopped laughing and the booming sound of it died away. Its mirth had never traveled up into his hard eyes and they were cold and merciless now.

"You always was a big clumsy ox, Fancher. Who did it?"

"Loney Howard."

"You kill him?"

"He never gimme a chance. I'd've had to kill off the whole

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damned Little Rockies Pool. He ketched me off guard when I wasn't lookin' fer it and the rest of—"

"Shut up, Fancher. I don't pay you for cryin' on my shoulder. Where's Little Cass?"

"Ain't he here?"

"Would I be asking you where he was if he was here? By Satan, it's time I got here. You hung Sid Gibbons' hide on the fence?"

"Little Cass won't let me bother Sid Gibbons. And you told me to take all my orders from Little Cass."

Big Cass Blackstone cursed Red Fancher for a thick-skulled, white-livered, clumsy fool.

"Sid Gibbons kin hamstring me. He's dangerous. He'll be dangerous till he's killed off. Damn well you know that, Fancher."

"I know it. Yeah. But Little Cass don't seem to know about the snake tracks along your back trail, Cass. He never heard of the Fence Cutter War down in Texas. And Sid Gibbons has a shore purty daughter. Little Cass don't want Susan Gibbons' old man bothered a-tall."

Red Fancher was getting back some of his nerve. He watched Big Cass craftily.

"I made Lon Howard's death look so damn' nacheral," said Red Fancher, "that not even his son Loney ever suspected it was a killin'. You'd orter be grateful. I could've done the same fer Sid Gibbons if Little Cass hadn't told me that he'd skin me alive if anything happened to Sleeper Sid. Why ain't you ever told that son of yourn what happened down in Texas? Hell, he's cold-blooded enough to savvy—"

"Shut up, Fancher. Little Cass Blackstone is goin' to be Governor Cass Blackstone of Montana some day. He's got to keep his hands clean. Politics is a dirty game. If some political enemy got hold of anything like that, he'd sling it for mud. That son of mine don't know I come from Texas. I don't want him ever to find out anything about it. Lon Howard and Sid Gibbons were the only two men who could prove anything on me. You got paid for what happened to Lon Howard. Now git rid of Sid Gibbons before he sights me.

"I'm back here to stay. I froze out those city gents. The Anchor is all mine. I'm handin' it over to Little Cass. Your job is to git rid of Sid Gibbons. I don't give a damn how you do it. Show me his dead carcass and you ramrod the Anchor. You might as well kill Lon Howard's son Loney while you're at it."

"I aim to. Pin a law badge on my shirt, Cass. I'll make it legal as hell."

The thought of Red Fancher wearing a law badge seemed to strike Big Cass as grimly comical. "It'll singe the hair off your chest. But you'll git one."

Red Fancher spat tobacco juice through battered lips. Then he pointed, an evil grin on his smashed face.

"Yonder comes your only son Little Cass—and Sleeper Sid Gibbons' schoolmarm daughter Susan. I'll check the bet to you, boss."

Big Cass stared at the approaching

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riders and growled at Red Fancher to get the hell out of sight and stay hid out.

IV

Little Cass Blackstone was surprised to see his father. Surprised and a little scared. The fear showed for a brief moment in his eyes and on his lean face. Then he reached out and patted Susan Gibbons' gloved hand as their stirrups touched.

"It's Big Cass himself, Sue. His growl is worse than his bite. Don't be scared."

"Me? What have I to be scared about?"

Susan had a short straight nose and a firm little chin, and her red-lipped mouth was square at the corners now. Her eyes were steady under almost heavy black brows.

Big Cass stood there on big wide-spread legs and waited for them to ride up. When he chose, Big Cass could be as polished and smooth of speech as his educated son. His Stetson hat came off with a sweeping gallantry. But his eyes flicked his son's with a whiplash.

Susan Gibbons did not feel at all shabby in her faded denim and flannel. Her boots were shop-made and she wore a man's 5X beaver Stetson at a cowpuncher slant on her sleek black hair. She sat a horse as though she belonged there and her saddlehorn was rope-marked to its steel core.

It was the first time Sue had ever laid eyes on Big Cass Blackstone. She could not help but be impressed. And she felt somehow flattered by his greeting. But she had caught that brief hard look Big Cass had cut his son and she saw the dark color stain the lean face of Little Cass and knew, just as surely as if it had been put into words for her that Big Cass Blackstone was not letting his son marry any little two-bit Landusky schoolmarm whose father was poverty-ridden. It was all right with Big Cass if his son amused himself with her cheap little company, but that was where it stopped. Big Cass would select a fitting mate for his son like he picked prize heifers for his prize Hereford bulls.

Little Cass introduced her to his father. "This is Susan's birthday so she declared a school holiday and rode here for dinner. I didn't expect you, Governor."

"I wired you to meet me at Chinook. The telegram is with your week's accumulation of mail on the table at the lodge. Birthday, eh? Congratulations, young lady. We'll celebrate together. This is something of an occasion."

"Holiday, Governor?"

"Call it that. I'm here to stay. I pokered the other stockholders out of their share in the Anchor. Get down and turn your horses loose. I'll be in bed and out from underfoot when your lovers' moon rises."

There was something obscene in Big Cass Blackstone's chuckle. Susan felt the hot color stain her tanned cheeks. She was holding a handmade rawhide quirt by its wrist loop.

Big Cass Blackstone was standing near her horse's head. A faint grin

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on his thin-lipped mouth, he looked her over with eyes that matched his heavy chuckle.

Susan's arm lifted. The heavy quirt made a hissing sound. Big Cass had no time to duck. The rawhide quirt and its twin tails caught him across the mouth and eyes with a ripping, savage, slashing force that drew blood.

Big Cass reeled backwards, blinded by the rawhide that had quirted him across the eyes. He spat blood and a string of foul profanity.

Little Cass was staring, slack-jawed. Susan whirled her horse and rode away at a lope, without a backward glance. She was too filled with seething fury to be scared. She was not running away from anything she feared. She was getting away from Big Cass and his ugly, unclean look. And she was riding away from Little Cass because she no longer wanted to hear the sound of his voice or see the look in his eyes or feel the touch of his caressing hand. Susan Gibbons, the little Landusky schoolmarm, had been suddenly and ruthlessly wakened from some sort of a dream. She wanted to be alone, feel the wind in her face, fight out a battle with herself. When she finally slowed down, she let her horse choose his own way.

Back at the Anchor Ranch Big Cass was wiping the blood from his mouth and blinking the pain from his quirt-bruised eyes. And Little Cass was watching his father. The blood had drained from the lean tanned face of Little Cass. Fear and a futile kind of wrath twisted his belly into a cold hard knot. He dared not open his mouth. There was cold-blooded murder glinting in the slitted eyes of his father.

Big Cass dared not trust himself to speak. He would say too much, let something slip. Something that would uncover what Red Fancher called the snake tracks on his back trail. And that would wreck and ruin and tear down all and everything Big Cass Blackstone had built up so cunningly and so ruthlessly during all the years since he and Red Fancher had quit Texas between a sundown and sunrise. And so Big Cass stood there and his huge fists clenched until the knuckles showed bone-white. It was a while before he could trust himself to speak and then his voice had a rasping, croaking sound.

"It's time," he said, "that I got here to take this Anchor over, while there's something left of it. Take care of your horse. Then go to the bunkhouse. Burn those range-dude clothes you're sportin' and put on some work duds. You can't run a cow outfit so you'll ride fence and pull bog and shovel manure and you'll be paid forty dollars a month. I'm cuttin' you off at the pockets till you git the college nonsense knocked out of your system. And if Red Fancher don't change his ways, he'll be swingin' another manure fork. He'll tell you why. A yellow-bellied clumsy bungler and a girl-chasin' college range dude. By the eternal hell I've fought big odds and sweated blood to build up this Anchor outfit and if you think I'm goin' to hand it on a gold platter to a son that quits

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his outfit to chase after a cheap little two-bit mongrel . . ."

Little Cass flinched as though he was being quirted. He had always been afraid of his father, without knowing why. He knew that Big Cass Blackstone worshipped his only son. But it was not a father's kindly understanding love. Rather, it was that Little Cass was Big Cass' heir and the elder Blackstone had taken pains to fashion his son into the man he wanted him to be—cold-blooded, cunning, ruthless, uncompromising, without the hint of a weak streak.

"Gamble," Big Cass Blackstone had taught his son. "But gamble to win. Never lose. If you can't win honestly, mark the cards. But be smart enough never to get caught cold-decking a man.

"Drink. But learn to handle your liquor without getting drunk. Let the other man get drunk.

"Women. Pick the best. But don't lose a thing to any woman on earth. Take. Don't give. A giver is a weakling and a fool. It's the man who takes what he wants who climbs up on top of the heap. Remember that, son. Don't ever forget it."

That was a part of the code of Big Cass Blackstone and he handed it over to his only son. And now he was flailing his son with a whiplash tongue. And there was a terrible fury behind it that showed in his pain-seared, bloodshot, quirted eyes. Murder glinted there with ugly little lights. He would kill his only son if that son failed to live up to the ruthless, uncompromising standard Big Cass Blackstone had set for him.

While up in the hayloft of the big log barn, Red Fancher crouched and watched and listened, unseen until Big Cass talked himself out and strode back to the lodge. Little Cass stabled his horse and headed for the bunkhouse like a hound pup that has been badly whipped and is slinking off alone to lick its wounds.

When the sign was right Red Fancher went on to the bunkhouse. Little Cass was drinking from a quart bottle of booze. He glared at Fancher, at Fancher's battered face. Then he grinned thinly and shoved the bottle at him.

"Worked us both over," said Little Cass. It was the only time he had ever offered Fancher a drink.

"It was Loney Howard beat me up," said Red Fancher. "Big Cass just rubbed a lot of rock salt into the raw places. . . . I heard and saw most of what you got. Sue Gibbons kind o' played hell all around, eh?"

"The Governor can hand it out but he can't take it. I never saw him that ringy. Have you, Fancher?"

It was a direct question and put with deliberate cunning. Fancher's eyes slid away from young Cass' hard stare.

"You ever see him mad enough to kill, Fancher?"

"Don't ask me that no more, Little Cass. I want to live a while longer. He'd kill me. He'll kill me, anyway, when he's done with me. But that won't be for a few years. Till then, don't ask me no questions."

"It was before he changed his name to Blackstone, wasn't it, Fancher? Somewhere down in Texas.

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His name was Cass. They called you Kid Fancher. You went to the pen, but Cass never got caught. Texas Ranger law has a long arm, though. It never quits reaching—especially when it gropes out after a man who has killed a captain of the Texas Rangers. Stop me if I'm getting any of this wrong, Fancher. . . ."

"Stop!" Fancher's voice was a croaking whisper. He opened the bunkhouse door and peered out, in all directions. Then he closed it. "Quit it, Little Cass. You want to git me murdered?"

"I don't give a damn when or how you die, Fancher. You might die here and now if you don't take your hand off your gun. I can fill your big belly full of lead before you thumb back your gun hammer. Later on, I want to have a little medicine powwow with you. I don't like being kicked around, even when it's Big Cass that's doing the booting. Big Cass has been an excellent tutor. Maybe I'm the bright scholar who learned too fast and too much. Don't take this little talk to my father. I don't want to have to kill you, not till you've outworn your usefulness. Now give me my whiskey."

V

When Loney Howard was a small boy his father had told him that if he actually wanted to learn what there was to know about handling a beef herd, to watch Sid Gibbons. And there was a lot to learn about handling beef steers.

So whenever he got the chance Loney would ride out of an evening to watch Sleeper Sid graze his beef herd onto the bed ground. Riding along with the grizzled old cowman, he would watch and listen to Sid Gibbons auger. That was what they called cocktail guard when the men on day herd were relieved and the cowhands on the next guard rode out with their bellies full of supper grub and smoking their after-supper cigarettes as they slowly turned in the loose edges of the scattered cattle and walked the big native steers, grazing, into a closer bunch, while Sleeper Sid worked around ahead and turned back the grazing leaders so effortlessly that the steers never knew they were being held up because their paunches were filled with grass and they had watered and were content to stand and chew cud. Then the other riders would work the edges of the beef herd in, not too close, while the sun went down and the twilight thickened in the coulees.

To pick a good bed ground and graze a beef herd onto it so the cattle would bed down easy and slow of their own accord and lay there, chewing cud and blowing with full-paunched contentment—that was another of the many, many tricks to the cowhand trade that you had to learn. It looked simple and easy but it took savvy and patience. And Sleeper Sid Gibbons was a master at it.

That time of the evening, when a

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man has had supper and his tobacco smoke tastes best, when the sunset and afterglow paints the Montana prairie with softly blending shadow colors, a cowpuncher's thoughts are apt to drift back along the dim trails and if another man of his own breed is along, they will auger about things they conjure up out of the past. And the talk will be about men and horses and cattle, or some faded love affair.

Sleeper Sid Gibbons and Loney Howard rode slowly around the bedded herd in the twilight. Sid's soft, gentle voice was easy to listen to.

"I'm shore proud," said the old cowman, "to watch you growin' into the spittin' image of my ol' pardner Lon Howard. Me'n Lon pointed one of the first trail herds up out o' Texas. And while we stood night guard together we kind o' augered out our big dreams.

"How we'd take up ranches in Montana, quit our hellin' around and settle down. Marry us a pair of good girls and mebbyso raise us families. And together, me'n Lon Howard made a lot of them knot-headed cowboy dreams come real. We located here and spread out. Married girls that done their part. Lon's wife give him a son before she died. And me'n my good wife had little Sue. And me'n Lon Howard was so rollin' in content that we could almost fergit that we'd bin tangled up down yonder in a fence-cutter range war. . . . Lon ever tell you about it?"

"Some." Loney nodded. "Not too much. He wasn't proud of it."

"Ner me, son. Ner me. We was young and wild and we packed hair-trigger guns. We was well on our way to bad trouble when we pulled up lame. It was Captain Bob Clarey who tripped us up, then set us on the right trail. He rode over one night to where me'n Lon Howard was camped.

" 'There's a pool herd,' Cap'n Bob Clarey told me'n Lon, 'headed fer Montana. I want you two boys to throw what cattle you got into that trail herd and go north with it. And it might be just as well if you locate up yonder in Montana. Hell is goin' to bust loose here in Texas and I'd hate for the sons of two old dead Texas friends of mine to be mixed up in it. I growed up with your daddies. Was with 'em when they died brave a-fightin' for the freedom of Texas. It's the least I kin do now fer their sons. You boys is in renegade company. The time has come fer you to break away from them fence cutters.' "

"Cap'n Bob Clarey shook hands with me'n Lon and rode off. And that was the last time we ever seen that fearless man alive. He'd bin gone about half an hour when me'n Lon heard shootin' down the river. We forked our horses and rode cautious. We'd about reached the place where we'd heard the shootin' when we was halted.

"It was a couple of our wire-cutter outfit that stopped us. Big Whitey Cass and a tough button called Red Kid Fancher. They was set to kill us but they made a deal. If me'n Lon Howard would keep our traps shut and quit Texas, they'd let us go. Me'n Lon wasn't in no position to

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put up an argument. We agreed.

"We throwed our cattle into the trail herd that was headed north. And when we heard that Cap'n Bob Clarey had bin bushwhacked and Red Kid Fancher was wounded and in jail, and the Rangers was ten jumps behind big Whitey Cass, and Cass a-whippin' under-and-over fer a renegade gitaway, me'n Lon Howard kept our traps shut. What else could we do?"

"Nothin'," agreed Loney Howard. He had heard somewhat the same story before, from his father.

"Red Kid Fancher squealed," said Sid Gibbons. "Turned what's called State's evidence. He give the Rangers a list of every barb-wire fence cutter in the gang, includin' Whitey Cass. Me'n Lon Howard was on that list. And mebby you think we wasn't plumb tickled to git out o' Texas alive and free. It was a close shave. We swore to profit by the lesson, and we did.

"Fancher showed up in Montana the spring of '84. Bigger, older, and tougher. That stretch in the Texas pen hadn't give Red Fancher religion. On the contrary. He moved in here, showed me'n Lon his release papers from the Texas pen and told us what would happen to us if ever we talked out o' turn. He hinted some about Whitey Cass bein' alive and twice as big and tough as ever he was in Texas. . . . And about a year later I rode up on Lon Howard's dead body.

"It looked like Lon's horse had stepped in a badger hole and turned over and Lon had landed on his head on a big boulder that caved his skull in. And there was no provin' anything otherwise. There was badger holes in the ground. But Lon's horse wasn't lame. And a six-shooter barrel kin cave in a man's skull thataway. . . .

"I rode over to Fancher's place. I went there to kill him. Fancher talked hisself out of it. Begged and slobbered and swore by all there is fer a man to swear by that he never killed Lon Howard. I couldn't shoot him down when he throwed away his gun and crawled like a dog on his belly."

"But you still figure," Loney Howard spoke quietly, "that Fancher murdered my father?"

"I'd gamble my Half Circle C on it, son. I was hopin' today at the brandin' that you'd kill Fancher. But I'm glad now that you didn't. It's a chore I'd be proud to do fer my old pardner."

Sleeper Sid Gibbons smiled gently, his puckered eyes bright and sky blue in the twilight. And it was then that Loney noticed for the first time that Sleeper Sid had taken his old long-barreled, wooden-handled six-shooter from his war sack and was packing it in the pocket of his leather chaps.

There was nothing Loney could say. They rode on around the bedded herd in silence and the shadows of dusk thickened.

It was almost time for the men on first guard to ride out and take over the herd.

The evening star came out. And from the far side of the beef herd drifted the clear sweet sound of an old trail song they both knew.

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"Last night as I lay on the bed ground
And looked at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy
Would go to that sweet Bye and Bye. . . ."

Loney caught his breath. Old Sleeper Sid Gibbons' head tilted sideways. He was listening.

"Could be an angel a-singin', son. But most mebby it's little Sue."

They reined up as Susan Gibbons rode out of the purple dusk.

"They told me at camp," said Susan, "that you were short-handed. I'll ride the Anchor rep string."

She saw the grin on Loney's face stiffen. She rode alongside him and her buckskin-gloved hand rested on his arm.

"'And one to grow on.'" She smiled into Loney's eyes. "Or am I grown too big?"

Their eyes met and held. And Loney Howard's grin lost its stiff-lipped grimness and traveled up into his eyes. He reached out and yanked her from her saddle and flattened her across his saddlehorn and began counting as he smacked the palm of his gloved hand down hard on the seat of her Levis.

". . . And one to grow on." He lifted her up and kissed her hard, then swung her back a-straddle of her saddle.

"I've bin wantin' to do that," he told her, "for a long time."

Loney Howard had broken one of Sid Gibbons' beef-herd laws. He had disturbed the peace of the quietly bedded herd and the grizzled cowman was cussing softly into his drooping white mustache as he gathered the beef steers that had been half-spooked by the disturbance so close to the herd. But Sleeper Sid's cussing had a deep quiet chuckle in it.

"Darn you, Loney. That hurt. I'll ride standing in my stirrups for a week."

"Two of us. I got Fancher's hot iron on the seat of my britches. . . . I dropped that buckskin colt I broke last winter in your schoolhouse pasture for your birthday. The kids said you'd turned 'em loose for a holiday and gone to the Anchor Ranch with Little Cass, but I held out enough hopes to tell the cook to build a son-of-a-gun-in-the-sack in case you showed up. If you didn't, it would be the first birthday you ever missed with the Little Rockies Pool wagon. . . . Sid's had his eye on the skyline all day."

Sue nodded. She was blinking hard and a tear rolled out from under her thick black lashes.

"I think we'd better ride off a ways, Loney. I don't want to spook papa's beef herd and I think . . . I'm going to bawl. . . ."

VI

They rode off together into a long coulee and reined up. Loney swung off his horse and lifted Sue from her saddle and for quite a long time he held her in his arms the way he used

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to hold her when she was a kid and had been hurt. Neither of them spoke. And then Loney untied the black silk handkerchief from around his neck and shook the dust from it and held it under Sue's short nose and told her to blow hard.

Then they rode on to camp. Sleeper Sid caught up with them and they went on together and the cook beamed happily as he displayed that roundup specialty called a son-of-a-gun-in-the-sack.

They sat around the campfire until second guard time and Loney told the two men booked for that guard that they could roll in. He and Sue would stand their guard. They saddled the two night horses and rode out to the herd in the moonlight.

It was like old times, Loney said. And Sue wondered aloud how long this peace and happiness of tonight could last.

"I'm afraid, Loney," she said quietly, "that I've declared war for you. Against the Anchor. . . . I quirted Big Cass Blackstone across the face today."

"*Big* Cass?"

"In person. Hang onto your bushy tail and I'll tell you all about it."

The herd was lying on the bed ground like so many wooden steers, the stars were out and the moon shining as they rode along together and Susan Gibbons told her story.

It went back several years to her first dance with Little Cass and how she had been flattered by his attention and sort of swept off her feet by his suave ways. Some of it made Loney a little sick inside but he did not break into her story. He knew that it wasn't at all easy for a girl of Susan Gibbons' pride to unburden herself like this.

"You told me," she said, "that Little Cass was bad medicine. It had the wrong effect. I'm mule-headed. I actually went after Little Cass then. The little tinhorn schoolmarm sharpened her weapons and used all the tricks in her cheap little bag. Maybe it worked. But most maybe I was just making a complete little fool of myself. It was Big Cass who actually woke me up. Then I caught the same look in Little Cass' eyes and for the first time in my life, I felt cheap."

Loney's hand gripped her shoulder. She gave him a queer little smile and shook her head.

"Not what you think, Loney. I've never let Little Cass or any man paw me. You're the only man I have ever really kissed. I kept Little Cass at a distance. That's a woman's way of playing the game when she plays for keeps. I wanted a wedding ring set with diamonds and the big Anchor outfit for a wedding present. But Little Cass wasn't playing it that way. I knew it when Big Cass spoke, when I saw the same look in the eyes of Little Cass. To him I had never been anything but a two-bit little schoolmarm who was playing hard to catch. And it's going to be a long time before I can laugh at myself."

"Another spankin' might help."

"It might. I had something gentler in mind."

Loney kissed her and Sue said that helped some. "But no more, now.

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We come to the skullduggery. The dirty work at the crossroads. There were a few times when Little Cass talked out of turn. When I sort of threw the hooks into him about being nothing more than a hired man at the Anchor, taking his orders from Big Cass Blackstone, it hurt his pride. And he forgot caution and bragged that he had Big Cass Blackstone where he wanted him.

"Cass Blackstone, the mysterious Big Cass Blackstone, was run out of Texas. His real name is Cass. He just tacked on the Blackstone. Big Cass and Fancher knew each other too well down in Texas years ago, and they were mixed up in something bad down there. Your father and my father were mixed up in the same ugly business. Does all this sound like dime novel stuff to you, Loney?"

"Nope. It fits in. Just keep talkin'."

But two Pool men rode up then to go on third guard. They acted worried.

"Sleeper Sid has pulled out, Loney. He's packin' a gun. And he's headed for the Anchor Ranch. I thought you'd want to know about it."

VII

There was a six-shooter in Red Fancher's hand and cold-blooded murder glittered in his pale-blue eyes. He had drunk almost a quart of rot-gut booze to take the chill of fear out of his insides and until it died out in him, Red Fancher was dangerous. He had Big Cass and Little Cass with their hands in the air, their backs to the varnished log wall, there in the big living room of the lodge.

Big Cass had stood on the big porch and bellowed out at the log bunkhouse like some big bull on the prod.

"You, Little Cass! Git over here to the lodge! Fancher, you white-livered fool, rattle your hocks! Come here and git your orders!" And he had gone inside to salve his quirted hide and quirted pride with whiskey.

Little Cass had gotten there first, cold-eyed and sullen under his father's bull-bellowing wrath. Standing with his back to the wall and a tall glass of whiskey in his hand, Big Cass motioned his son to a chair. But Little Cass had remained standing, staring level-eyed at his father.

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Neither of them had heard Red Fancher come in by the back door. They did not see him standing in the doorway to the hall until his rasping voice broke across the tense silence of their glaring anger.

"Hands up!" Fancher's voice sounded deadly. "Or I'll kill yuh both!"

Big Cass and Little Cass whirled. They saw the look in Red Fancher's eyes and knew he meant it. They shoved their hands up.

"You're drunk, Fancher." Big Cass growled. "Crazy drunk. Put up that gun."

"I'll put up my gun when I'm done with it. I taken my last orders from you, big mister. And that goes double for your lily-fingered whelp. I'm crackin' the bull whip now. I want to see you look scared before I gut-shoot yuh both." He swaggered heavily into the big living room.

"You'll never git away with it, Fancher," said Big Cass. "You'll hang for murder."

There was a new-looking nickeled special deputy sheriff badge pinned now to Red Fancher's blood-spattered shirt. His yellow teeth bared and he polished the law badge with the heel of his dirty left hand.

"I managed fer the law badge a month ago. Used your Anchor drag to git it. The law won't hang the man that kills Whitey Cass from Texas. . . ."

"You dirty double-crosser!" Big Cass' face was gray, mottled.

Red Fancher grinned and spat tobacco juice on the polished hardwood floor.

"Then I'll kill your Little Cass whelp in what the law calls self-defense. . . . You're scared to die, ain't yuh, Little Cass?"

Little Cass did not answer. His cold gray-green eyes were staring past Fancher into the dark hallway through which the ramrod had come. Big Cass was staring, narrow-eyed, in the same direction.

"You've changed consider'ble, Whitey," sounded the soft, quiet voice of Sleeper Sid Gibbons. "But I'd a-knowed you . . . I come to kill Fancher because he murdered my pardner, Lon Howard."

Stooped and bowlegged and careworn, Sleeper Sid Gibbons looked sort of harmless, until you noticed that his puckered eyes were slits of blue ice and there was a long-barreled six-shooter in his gnarled hand.

There was a brief moment of tense silence. Then the click-click of Sid Gibbons thumbing back his gun hammer.

Red Fancher's back was towards the dark hallway. The cocking of Sleeper Sid's six-shooter broke his tautly pulled nerves and Fancher whirled and fired.

From the darkened hallway Sid Gibbons' six-shooter spewed a streak of flame and the explosions of the two guns blended. Red Fancher doubled up, his left hand clawing at his belly, and Sid Gibbons' gun blazed a second time. The heavy .45 slug struck Fancher in the forehead and he went down like a shot beef.

Big Cass and Little Cass pulled their guns just as the front door

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crashed open. Gunpowder smoke made a blue haze in the lamplight and through it they saw Loney Howard standing there in the open doorway with the moonlight at his back. Loney, who was the living image of his father when Lon Howard was that young.

From the dark hallway came the sound of Sid Gibbons' quiet chuckle.

"Shore looks like Lon, don't he, Whitey?" Sleeper Sid cocked his six-shooter. "Red Fancher murdered your daddy, Loney. And I paid off Lon's debt. But it was Whitey Cass paid money fer the killin'. So I got to shoot Whitey. No two ways about it. You kin have Little Cass. Don't shoot to miss, son." Sleeper Sid Gibbons' voice was soft and quiet, almost mild-toned. But deadly.

Then Sleeper Sid's long-barreled six-shooter spat flame and the heavy roar of it filled the log lodge. Big Cass grunted as though he had been kicked hard and low. His huge back was against the polished log wall and his thick legs braced, wide-spread, to keep him from falling. The gun he had slid a moment ago from its shoulder holster was spewing streaks of fire. A double-action .38 special, it was a quick-firing, deadly weapon.

But from the dark hallway old Sid Gibbons' .45 was roaring and belching flame, and the heavy slugs were thudding into Big Cass' hard paunch and barrel chest.

Loney Howard heard the guns exploding, but he had eyes only for Little Cass. Little Cass had overturned the big heavy oak table and was crouched behind it, his gun spitting fire.

Loney moved with split-second quickness. A bullet creased his ribs and it felt like a branding iron. Then he was over the table and on top of Little Cass and they were locked in a savage tangle of arms and legs.

They rolled over and over until they crashed into the log wall. Loney kicked and fought free and scrambled to his feet just as Little Cass twisted around and up onto his legs, his back to the log wall, his gun in his hand.

They weren't six feet apart. And with a sudden, sickening shock, Loney realized he was at the cold-blooded mercy of Little Cass. Because there was no gun in Loney's right hand. His gun hand was empty. Worse than that, it dangled uselessly at the end of an arm that had somehow broken between the elbow and wrist. In the heat of the ruckus he had not even felt the cracking break of bone.

Little Cass saw it. His teeth bared and his slitted eyes were slivers of green glass. His gun was gripped in his hand.

Almost at Loney's feet lay the dead hulk of Red Fancher. Fancher's six-shooter lay on the floor in a puddle of blood and tobacco spit. Loney caught the glint of the shining gun barrel just as Little Cass pulled his gun trigger. Dropping flat, Loney clawed for the gun with his left hand. He twisted over on his back, thumbed the gun hammer, and then he pulled the trigger.

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His ears were deafened by the roaring crash of gunfire. His eyes, peering desperately through the gun smoke, sighted Little Cass.

Little Cass' face was gray and his lower jaw sagged open. He coughed once and blood spewed from his open mouth and Loney pulled his gun trigger and shot again. But he knew he was shooting at a dead man, that Little Cass was dead on his feet. And then Little Cass' legs buckled and he pitched headlong and fell on top of the man whose bullets had killed him. Loney had to shove off the dead weight and crawl out from under the blood-smeared dead man.

Loney got slowly to his feet. He saw Big Cass, Red Fancher and Little Cass sprawled motionless and dead in their widening puddles of blood and he knew it was all over now. The gun in his hand felt sticky and he let go of it and wiped his hand off on a bearskin rug. The acrid fumes of gunpowder smoke clogged his nostrils and choked his lungs and he coughed. The sound of it, coming on top of the dead gun echoes, was puny, like an anti-climax to death. Loney felt sick. Pain from his broken arm was sending sharp stabs up into his shoulder.

"You look kind o' green, son," Sleeper Sid Gibbons' voice was soft and quiet and gentle, "around the gills. You ain't got the stummick fer killin'. And it's just as well."

Sleeper Sid came out of the dark hallway, a slow grin on his leathery face. He was ejecting the six empty shells from his long-barreled, wooden-handled six-shooter. And Loney knew that the bullet from the last cartridge in the old cattleman's gun was the shot that had killed Little Cass.

Sleeper Sid had come through the gun ruckus without a bullet scratch. He said with a chuckle that he had never given any of 'em a good shot at him because he was lying flat in the dark hallway and their bullets all went too high to reach him. A man would be a plain fool to give enemies like Red Fancher and Whitey Cass a target. That was the secret of how so many notorious gun-slingers lived so long to cut notches on their gun handles.

He did an expert job of setting and splinting Loney's broken arm and patching the bullet nick along Loney's ribs. When pain twisted the young cowman's face Sleeper Sid made him take another drink from the bottle of whiskey he had fetched from the little bar at the end of the room.

The powder-smoke fumes were still clinging in the lamplight when Susan Gibbons got there. She had fetched the Little Rockies Pool outfit with her. Loney met her out on the porch. He said he didn't want her to go inside. And Sleeper Sid came out where they were.

Sleeper Sid said it might be a good idea for Loney to take his Pool outfit and ride on down the creek about ten miles to where the Anchor roundup was camped. Now was the time to wean the Anchor cowhands away from their guns and run 'em clear out of Montana.

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"Just tell 'em that Big Cass and Little Cass and Red Fancher are dead and they better quit the country while the trail out is still open."

Sleeper Sid gripped Loney's shoulder. "Little Sue is all yourn now, son. Take good care of her."

It was nearly noon when Loney Howard rode back to the Anchor Ranch. He and the Pool cowmen had little trouble convincing the Anchor cowhands that they had worn out their stay in Montana.

Susan was waiting for Loney at the barn. Her eyes were red-lidded, tear-dimmed.

"Sleeper Sid Gibbons," she said quietly, "is dead. He said that he knew now why the Big Boss had let Lon Howard's boy Loney save him from the last blizzard of the hard winter. And now he had done his chores and he felt tired and reckoned he would lie down and go to sleep. He kissed me and had me pull off his boots and then he lay down there under the big cottonwood and went to sleep. I covered him with a soogan and there was a little smile on his face. When I tucked the soogan over his shoulders I knew he was dead. He's happy now, Loney. Happy for the first time since my mother died, because his heart was buried with her in that frozen grave."

The State of Montana sold the Anchor outfit to Loney Howard and his bride. The price was set so low at sheriff's sale that it seemed like a gift. Perhaps it was.

Now and then on the roundup, Loney or one of the other cowmen would find a big sleeper-marked maverick.

"One of Sleeper Sid's!" Loney Howard's voice would have a little choked sound. "A Half Circle G. . . ."

The Half Circle G brand had been registered in the name of Sid Howard the day the baby was born. He was christened Sidney Howard but destined from babyhood to be called "Sleeper." When he was old enough to understand, Loney and Sue would tell him the story "Why."

THE END

TRUE SAYIN'

They say that a cowboy is this or he's that—
Some notice his gun an' some notice his hat.
But here's a true sayin' I once come across:
The cowboy's an hombre with guts—an' a hoss!

S. Omar Barker

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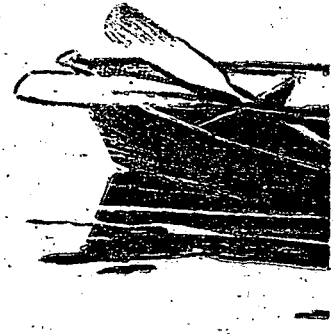
LET'S GO FISHIN'

by JIM WEST

Okay, you followers of Isaak Walton, here's the trail to relaxation and contentment—and may only the big ones take your bait!



If there was ever a year in which millions of Americans are eager to go fishing, this is it. Victory vacations, the first since the dark days of Pearl Harbor, are beckoning veterans and civilians alike to the nation's streams and lakes. From Maine to California, trout, bass, muskellunge, perch and panfish for the campfire breakfast are waiting to rise to the myriad lures of 1946's bumper crop of rod enthusiasts.

It's been said that if you want to make a man of your boy, or a boy again of the man, put a fishing-rod in his hands, show him where the fish are biting—and he's on the road to happiness and contentment. Fishing is unparalleled, healthy outdoor sport. Ask the barefoot kid with a

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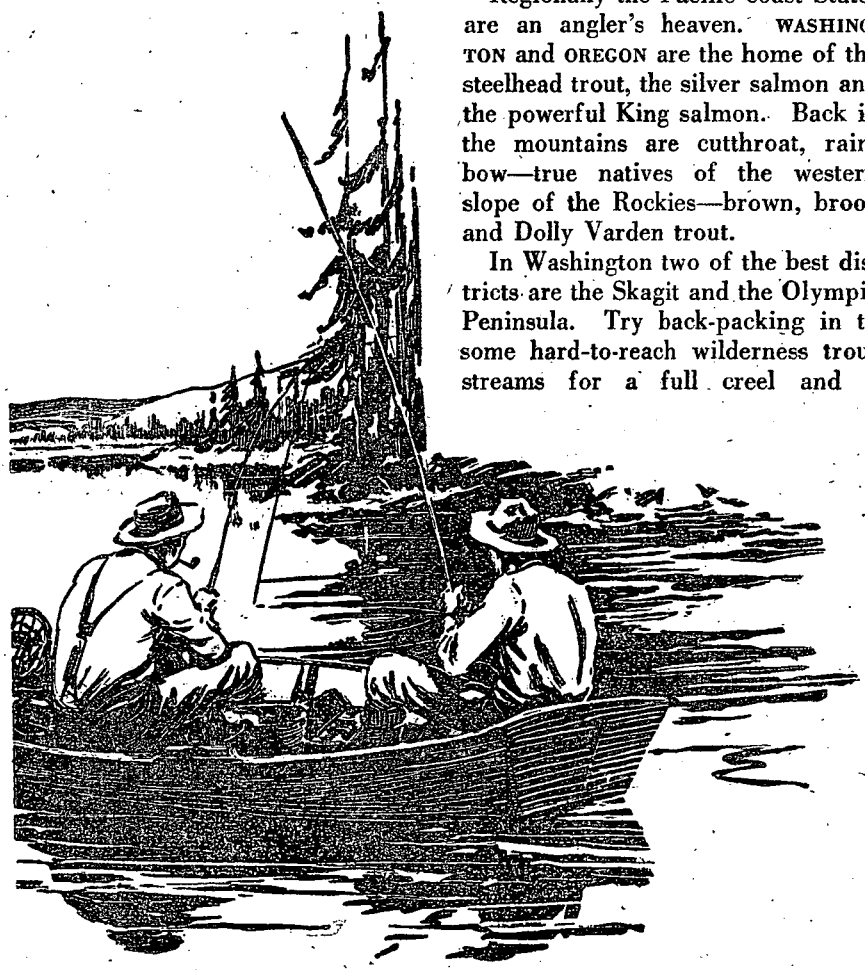
bamboo fish pole over his shoulder, and a can of worms fastened to his belt. Or the fellow with a load of fancy equipment in his car. They know. They're both disciples of Isaak Walton.

With so many places to fish in this land of ours, it's impossible to cover them all in one article. It would take volumes to do the job adequately.

Regionally the Pacific coast States are an angler's heaven. WASHINGTON and OREGON are the home of the steelhead trout, the silver salmon and the powerful King salmon. Back in the mountains are cutthroat, rainbow—true natives of the western slope of the Rockies—brown, brook and Dolly Varden trout.

In Washington two of the best districts are the Skagit and the Olympic Peninsula. Try back-packing in to some hard-to-reach wilderness trout streams for a full creel and a



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real fishing thrill. Another trip that will linger in your memory is racing down the Quinault or Queets River in a dugout piloted by a Quinault Indian guide. Part of the way you float along in the shadow of the tall timbers. At other times you shoot through churning, white-water rapids, or slip swiftly through rock-strewn narrows. And the rivers are fish-full throughout the route.

Oregon's Deschutes River, which flows into the Columbia a few miles east of The Dalles, is probably one of the most famous trout streams on the American continent. Distinctly a fly stream, it's big water and has big fish. The Metolius and Crooked Rivers supply the same kind of fishing, and the same kind of fish. These streams are likely to be at their best from opening date until about July 4th, and they offer fine fall angling from September 1st to the close of the season.

One of CALIFORNIA'S specialties is the rare Golden trout caught in the High Sierras. Generally speaking, they may be fished for from May to October, except in certain districts. Some of California's best fishing localities are in Siskiyou County, Humboldt County, and deep in the Sierra mountain range. The Lessen-Modoc National Forest area has many lakes and streams full of trout and bass. Alturas or Susanville make good fishing headquarters.

For the salt-water fisherman offshore in California are bonito, sea bass and the vicious barracuda.

From June on, fishing tempo in the Rocky mountain States increases through the summer months until it reaches its climax in September. The story is mainly trout—trout in roiling, tumbling, crystal-clear mountain creeks, trout in placid meadow brooks. But there are also land-locked salmon in certain lakes, whitefish and perhaps a chance for grayling.

The Ruby River in MONTANA has 100 miles of good fishing. And some of the best locations according to the State Fish and Game Warden are the Madison, Yellowstone, Missouri and Stillwater Rivers, and the north and south forks of the Flathead. In Montana you can pack in to the back country and fish, or you can try the more accessible streams and lakes and still catch 'em.

In NEVADA you can fish the Truckee River in Washoe County, the Carson in Lyon and Douglas Counties, or the streams in Elko, Lander, Nye, Esmeralda and Humboldt Counties. There's excellent lake-fishing at Tahoe, Topaz, Mead and Pyramid Lakes. Nevada is by no means all sand and sun and cactus. In fact the World's record cutthroat trout caught with rod and reel, a 41 pounder, was hauled out of Pyramid Lake in 1925.

ARIZONA'S White Mountains are

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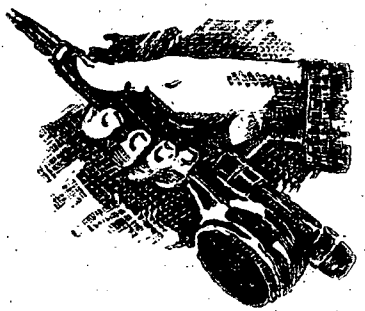
famous for trout. Warm-water fish can be angled for in Lake Mead, and in the man-made lakes behind Roosevelt, Apache and Parker Dams. Since Boulder Dam was completed, the Colorado River below the dam has become a fine trout stream. The water remains cold for miles below the dam, and trout can be caught as far down as Eldorado Canyon, 25 miles away. The planted fish are mainly rainbows. Getting down to the river is a difficult job except in a few places, such as Willow City on the Arizona side and Eldorado Canyon in Nevada. Both States recognize the licenses of the other in fishing this stretch of boundary river. Boat fishing is best. Boats may be obtained at the approaches mentioned.

Just how popular is the Colorado below Boulder Dam? Officials estimate *from 20,000 to 30,000 trout* are taken from it annually. That ought to give you an idea. Right now it's all-year fishing country too. There's no closed season.

There's a heap of unspoiled, wilderness country left in IDAHO. You can fish most of it with good chances of success. Mild-summer, or from August until late in the fall is the best season. Try the streams in Boundary County, or in Adams and Valley Counties. Other good localities include the following rivers: Clearwater, Middle fork of the Salmon, Selway, Lochsa, Coeur d'Alene, St. Maries, St. Joe, Pend Oreille, Upper Snake, Teton, Lost and Wood. Salmon spearing, if you hanker for a novelty, is restricted to the larger waters of the Salmon, Clearwater and Weiser Rivers, but catching salmon with artificial lures is permitted in the smaller streams.

WYOMING is another noted fishing State. You can't miss on fishing and vacation fun if you wet your line in the Pinedale region, the streams of the famous Jackson Hole area, or the Tetons. Other good sections are Sublette County, Upper Wind River, the Medicine Bow National Forest, Big Horn National Forest, and Fremont, Albany, Carbon, Big Horn, Sheridan and Johnson Counties. The height of the season is from July 1st to the end of October.

You can fish UTAH for salmon, black bass, trout, and mountain herring. Good localities include Grand-



daddy, Fish, Gooseberry, Puffer, Pauguitch, Navajo and Moon Lakes, and the Provo, Logan and Duschesne Rivers. The World's record brown trout, weighing 25½ pounds, was taken from the Logan.

Catfish, carp and what the local boys call "minnows" abound in the Green, San Juan and Colorado Rivers. The "minnows," a species of white-

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fish, sometimes weigh up to 30 pounds.

The Gunnison River in COLORADO is one of the country's, if not the world's, best trout streams, bar none. Try to hit it from July 1st on. Other well-known localities just about as good are the Conejos, Frying Pan, Platte, Poudre, Rio Grande and White Rivers. Less publicized but an excellent fishing stream nevertheless is the Pine River with Emerald Lake at its headwaters. There are countless other good rivers in the State, and also a lot of good lakes.

Some of the best fishing areas in ever-popular NEW MEXICO are the famous Chama area, Rio Arriba County, Eagle Nest, the Red River and the Upper Gila. The native blackspotted, or cutthroat, trout provide unexcelled angling in the cold-water streams. Loch Leven, Rainbow and Eastern Brook trout have also been introduced in the State. New Mexico's warm-water fishing areas teem with millions of black bass, crappie, perch, bream and catfish.

Fishing in the great plains area varies widely. Up north in the Black Hills area of SOUTH DAKOTA, Brook, Rainbow, Brown, and Loch Leven trout have been stocked in the mountain streams and the fishing is good. In NORTH DAKOTA there are perch, bass, crappie, pike and catfish to be had. The Cheyenne and Missouri Rivers, Strawberry, Spiritwood, Red Willow, Odland and Gordon Lakes are generally considered the best fishing localities.

NEBRASKA has catfish in its rivers, bass and crappie in its lakes, and pike, bass and catfish in its reservoirs. The North Platte region is probably best for pike and bass. The Lower Pralle, Blue and Republican Rivers afford fine cats, and there is some trout fishing in Morrell and Scottsbluff Counties. KANSAS is pretty much the same, with the best fishing in the eastern half of the State. Try Lyon, Woodson, Elk, Greenwood, Chautauqua, Cowley, Butler and Sedgwick Counties. A lot of fine-eating channel cats are caught in Kansas and the closed season lasts only a month—from April 15th to May 15th.

Eastern and southeastern OKLAHOMA afford that State's best fishing areas. Though it is mainly bass, cat and panfish country, the season is year around and good catches of black bass, small and large-mouth bass, calico bass and white perch are everyday occurrences.

TEXAS is a big State. Despite its plains and prairies, it is thronged with fishermen. Next to fishing, what most Texans like best is more fishing. The season's long for one thing, and for another the catch is good. Try Red Bluff Lake, Reeves and Loving Counties for bass, crappie and cat; Lake Kemp, Baylor County, for black bass and crappie. Caddo Lake teems with crappie, white and black bass. Other good fishing locations are Medina Lake, Bridgeport Lake, Lake Buchanan, Devil's River, and the Colorado, Brazos and Nueces Rivers.

Gulf fishing off the coast is a Texas specialty for salt-water anglers. You can wet your line for tarpon, or Spanish mackerel, for King or Red

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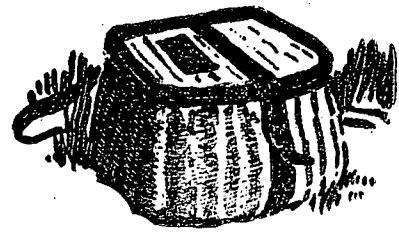
fish and get yourself some top-flight fishing fun.

In both Oklahoma and Texas, however, probably the most sought-after big fish is the mammoth Mississippi cat which sometimes tips the scales at 100 pounds. But the flesh is not as good for stews and fish frys as that of the more abundant, smaller channel catfish.

Anglers in the Mississippi Valley States take their fishing seriously, and it's plenty good. That chunk of flashing dynamite, the small-mouthed bass is a regional whizz. If you want variety, tackle wall-eyed pike, or the trout that have been introduced into the mountain streams of the OZARKS and WEST VIRGINIA. You can try for muskies in the Ohio River watershed. Lakes Bisteneau and Black are two of LOUISIANA's better bass fishing waters. Among good bass lakes in MISSISSIPPI are Moon, Eagle Lake near Vicksburg, and Lake Washington, south of Greenville. GEORGIA has Burton, Rabun, Tallulah and Nacoochee Lakes, good bass lakes every one of them, as are many others.

INDIANA runs to fishermen and vice versa. Before the war, that State ranked fifth in the country in the number of licenses issued. Large-mouth black bass are found in virtually every section of Indiana. Northern pike are taken locally. Bluegills, crappie, perch, trout and wall-eyes are other popular fish taken in good quantity.

The best large-mouth fishing in the country is very likely found in the South Atlantic States with FLORIDA's some 30,000 lakes a high standing choice for this game fish among fresh-water anglers. Florida large-mouths frequently weigh from 10 to 15 pounds. The salt-water sport fisherman has 1,500 miles of Gulf and Atlantic coast from which to try for tarpon and sailfish.



Lake Santeetlah, one mile from Robbinsville is one of the best bass lakes in western NORTH CAROLINA. It also affords good bream fishing and some trout. Lake Lure is another good spot. The Little Tennessee River, reached from Franklin or Bryson City, boasts bass, muskellunge, perch and bream. Rainbow trout and bass can be taken out of Cane River from Burnsville to about four miles above Pensacola in northern North Carolina.

You can fish the Smokies where some 600 miles of ideal trout waters are available in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. No fee is charged for fishing in the park, but you must have either a North Carolina or Tennessee license, depending on what part of the park you are in.

The Great Lakes States have their own special claim to fishing fame. That's the region where you can tie into a tackle-busting King's size muskellunge and battle him to a final

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landing. It's champ muskie, wall-eye and Great Northern pike country.

Record rod-and-reel muskellunge catch in the U. S. was a 59½ pounder taken from Grindstone Lake, WISCONSIN, in 1939. In the same State High Lake produced an 18-pound wall-eye—a World's record. The World's record Great Northern pike, 45¾ pounds, came from Basswood Lake, MINNESOTA, And while we are on the subject, it was from Isle Royal, MICHIGAN, that the U. S. record-setting 42½ pound lake trout was caught in 1924.

Trout and bass are also popular catches in the thousands of lakes and still more thousands of fine fishing streams found throughout the Great Lakes States.

In the Middle Atlantic States the vacation angler after fresh-water game fish, whether he is aware of it or not, owes a vote of thanks to hard-working conservation officials for the fine fishing that can still be found in this heavily populated section of the country. It is said to have the highest concentration of sport fishermen anywhere in the world.

Nothing short of an energetic and large-scale fish-planting program could possibly keep the countless streams and lakes of this area supplied with all possible species of trout, bass, pike and even muskellunge in the Alleghenies. Heavily fished as the region is, natural stream propagation sufficient for the sport fishermen's needs is something that has long since disappeared.

In NEW YORK big rainbows are regularly caught in the Finger Lakes and their feeder streams. Try Catherine Creek. Thirteen pounders have been caught there. They are stocked fish too.

Hundreds of lakes and ponds, big and little, in the Adirondacks afford good fishing. Through the colorful Catskills wind famous trout streams of long standing—the Esopus, Beaverkill and Willowemoc Rivers. In Essex County the Ausable River remains one of the best trout rivers in the State. Lake George is good for trout, bass and pike, if you know the spots. Good bass catches have been made right along in the numerous lakes dotting Bear Mountain State Park in Rockland County up the Hudson only about 40 miles from New York City.

Eastward into New England's fishing country the angler can cast for brookies in their home streams. The cool lakes and ice-water, boulder-blocked streams there are the native habitat of this top-flight gamester of all American sport fishing—the Eastern Brook trout. The spotted rascal, as a matter of cold fact, is not a trout at all, but a species of charr.

In MAINE's north woods hunting and fishing country the angler can pick his spots in a fishing region that's hard to forget. He'll get fish as well as exercise. The Rangeley Lakes are famous for brook trout and salmon. Keenebago Lake, restricted to fly-fishing, produces good brookies. So does Lake Parlin. Salmon, brook and lake trout are caught in famous Moosehead Lake. There's good fishing along the upper St. John

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and St. Francis Rivers and their tributaries. And the last few remaining Atlantic salmon in the United States may be fished for along the Pleasant, Dennys and Narraguagua Rivers in Washington County in the southeastern corner of the State.

Excellent fly-fishing trout streams in NEW HAMPSHIRE are the Androscoggin, and upper Connecticut Rivers. And you might try the Ashuelot back of Keene. Lakes Winnepesaukee and Sunapee are old standbys for bass and trout. Up in VERMONT there's that unspellable lake famed for its big fish—Lake Memphremagog. Try the Lamoille River for outsize trout. The Averill Lakes in the northeastern corner of the State are certain to produce lake trout, brook trout and landlocks. For those who prefer stream fishing, there are plenty of good ones to be had in the immediate vicinity.

North of the U. S. lie CANADA'S vast wilderness areas offering the angler from the States a three-thousand-mile-wide stretch of unsurpassed fishing. In this tremendous coast-to-coast expanse of fishing waters can be caught all the varieties of trout, bass, pike, and grandpa muskies. There is salmon fishing on both coasts and record tuna fishing off Nova Scotia.

North, South, East or West—whenever you plan a fishing trip, contact, by card or letter, the Fish and Game Commission of the State—in Canada it's the Province—you intend to fish in and secure a copy of the latest fishing regulations. Seasons change from time to time. Special local rulings may affect the district you wish to fish. It's well to know such things beforehand.

Okay, you Izaak Waltons. This year let's go fishing. And may only the big ones take your bait!

THE END

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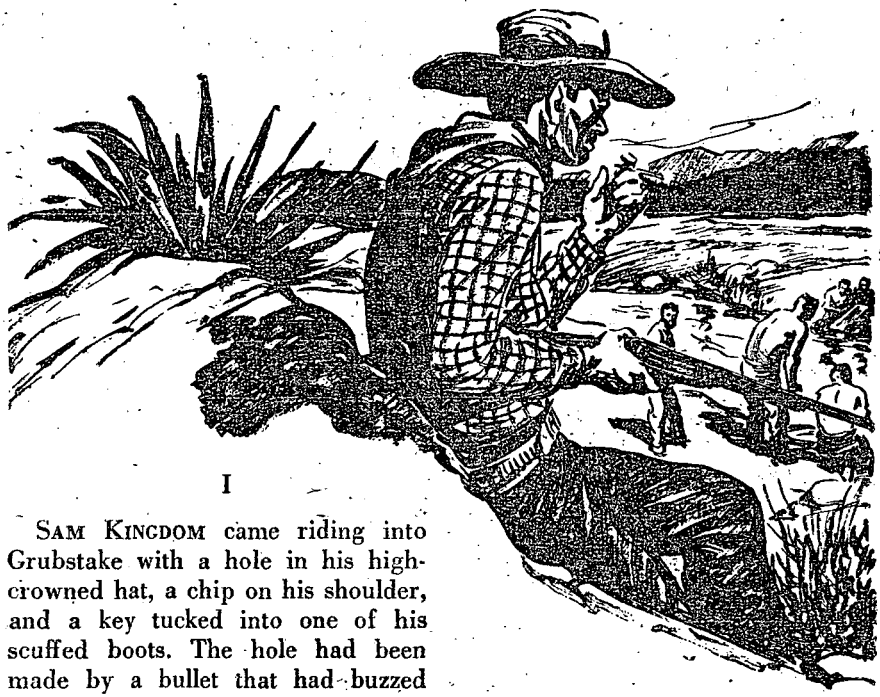
THE MYSTERY OF LOST CREEK



I

SAM KINGDOM came riding into Grubstake with a hole in his high-crowned hat, a chip on his shoulder, and a key tucked into one of his scuffed boots. The hole had been made by a bullet that had buzzed from the underbrush at this hill-country end of the long trail from his K-Gone-Crazy spread on the far side of the rearing Saddleback range. The chip on his shoulder—manifesting itself in the tightness of his lips—was prompted by a natural annoyance at a gunsmoke greeting in a land where he was presumably a stranger. The key was still another matter. Perhaps it fitted into the pattern somehow; perhaps not. Sam didn't know. All the answers to all the questions might lie here in this boom camp that had been born to lusty life along the slopes of Grubstake Gulch.

And so Sam Kingdom walked his horse among the scatteration of tents, evergreen lean-tos, shacks and cabins, a tall, lanky, gray-eyed man with

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by NORMAN A. FOX

A prisoner himself, would Sam Kingdom be able to unlock the gates of that renegade stronghold where gold was mined by the living dead?

a search to make, an alien figure among the heavy-booted breed of the placer miners who thronged the plank sidewalks. Grubstake had its substantial section, Sam soon discovered—several saloons, a livery stable, and stores.

One of the saloons had a sign proclaiming it to be the Red Nugget—Oliver Curry, Proprietor—and Sam dismounted at its hitch rack. Men made talk in saloons, and here Sam Kingdom hoped to find the beginning of another trail—the trail he had come to follow. He had one foot in a stirrup, one foot on the soggy earth, when he realized he was being addressed.

"Your gun, stranger," someone said. "You'll have to check it with me. We've got a no-gun law in Grubstake."

A dozen men stood before the Red Nugget, flannel-shirted, most of them, and brawny from the wielding of picks and shovels; and the one

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who'd spoken was the biggest man Sam had ever seen. Fat made a human mountain of him; his belly sagged over his crossed gun belts, and his eyes were lost in the puffiness of his face. He wore a town marshal's badge, and Sam instantly recognized the sign of authority, but that chip was still on Sam's shoulder and it prompted him to say: "Who's wanting my gun?"

"Me," said the fat man. "Seton. Lard Seton, town marshal. Fork it over, stranger."

"Why?" Sam demanded bluntly.

The sweep of a thick arm took in the pine-darkened Saddlebacks looming above the gulch. "Red McAffee's outlaw crew holes up in those hills," Seton explained. "We play safe by defanging anybody who comes into camp."

Sam thumbed back the bullet-riddled sombrero, revealing a shock of sandy hair. "You'd do better," he said pointedly, "to go looking for McAffee out *in* the hills."

Seton colored, the affability leaving him, and Sam sensed the makings of trouble. But he'd likely need his gun before he was finished in Grubstake, and he meant to keep it, so he slid his hand nearer to his holster, a gesture that was not lost upon Lard Seton. There might be courage in that great hulk; Sam didn't know, and before he could find out, a man said:

"Easy, Lard. I think you can make exception to the no-gun rule in Mr. Kingdom's case."

The sound of his own name stiffened Sam with surprise. He looked at the speaker and saw him to be Lard Seton's opposite, a man lean to the point of emaciation, and faultlessly garbed in black broadcloth. "Well, if you think so, Mr. Curry . . ." Seton said dubiously, and his voice trailed off.

This, then, was Oliver Curry of the Red Nugget. Sam fixed his eyes on Curry's thin wedge of a face and said: "I don't remember ever meeting you before."

"You haven't," Curry said. "You bear a certain resemblance to Tommy Kingdom. I thought you might be his brother."

Sam eyed the man with new interest. "Tommy and me don't favor each other much. You must have mighty sharp eyes, mister."

Curry bowed slightly. "Perhaps I had the advantage, since I've been expecting you. Tommy didn't get back to the range, is that it?"

"No," Sam said. "He didn't. And that holds true for the last three cowmen who've brought beef down here to feed this camp and make some quick money at the boom prices you're paying for meat on the hoof. First there was old Arizona Nevil of the Boxed N, then young Chesty Grinnel, repping for the Anchor. And now Tommy. What kind of spooky outfit is this where men vanish from the face of the earth?"

Curry shrugged. "It's as alarming to us as it is to you, Kingdom. I've a big investment here, and I want to see Grubstake turn into a town. But we can't survive without food, and we can't expect beef if the word gets around that the men who fetch it never get home. Your

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brother must have had the beef money with him when he disappeared. I'm willing to replace that sum out of my own pocket and give you a like amount if you'll fetch us more cattle."

Sam shook his head. "Sorry. This is no business trip. When I leave here I'll either have looked on Tommy's grave, or Tommy will be riding with me. Do you savvy?"

Curry shrugged again. "Of course. I shouldn't have broached business at all. Come inside and have a drink."

"Time's burning," Sam said. "All I wanted in your place was to listen to talk and ask a question. I can do that here. Where will I find Horseshoe Hobbs?"

"Hobbs? The old cowpoke who turned prospector? His cabin is on up the gulch. You can't miss it. It's the only one with a horseshoe nailed over the door."

"That would be Hobbs," Sam conceded. "Thanks."

He turned his back upon the veiled stare of Lard Seton, the poker face of Oliver Curry and the curious glances of the others. Swinging into the saddle again, he headed up the gulch. He was far from pleased. He had wanted to keep his business in Grubstake secret until he was prepared to show his hand, but this little affair with the camp's law and Oliver Curry had brought his mission into the open. This blazing summer day was coming to an end, and before deep dark fell, all Grubstake would know that Sam Kingdom was here in search of his missing brother. Fine chance now of working quietly!

With this mood of disgust upon him, Sam followed Snake Creek as it flashed redly in the dying sunlight, followed it until he came to the last of the cabins and found the one with a horseshoe over the door.

Horseshoe Hobbs came out of the dirt-roofed structure as Sam dismounted, and the bowlegged little oldster took one look and set the echoes ajar with a wild whoop.

"Sam, you young hoss thief!" he shouted, and there was much pounding of backs then, and when Sam could make himself heard, he said: "It's good to see you, too, you old coot. Is that bacon I smell frying?"

"Come in and get yore feet under the table," Horseshoe said and urged Sam through the doorway. "How's Tommy?"

Sam's face darkened. "Didn't you know? Tommy never came back from delivering beef here a few weeks ago. One man in Grubstake guessed what had fetched me here. I thought you would, too."

Horseshoe had padded across the dirt floor to take an extra plate from a packing-case cupboard. He turned now, his leathery old face ludicrous with disbelief.

"It's been camp talk that Chesty and old Arizona Nevil never made it home from here. Folks figger that Red McAffee's crew did for them in the hills to get the beef money they was packin'. But I'd've bet the biggest nugget in the gulch that Tommy Kingdom would skin through safe. You mean he's disappeared, too?"

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This meeting with the one man in Grubstake he knew, the only one he could call friend, had heartened Sam Kingdom. He had counted on Horseshoe Hobbs for information, had hoped that Horseshoe might set him on the right trail, yet the oldster obviously hadn't known what had happened. It took the spirit out of Sam, made his task loom gargantuan.

"Yes, Tommy disappeared," he said soberly. "You're the one cowman from our range who got gold fever and came here to stake a claim. Tommy was bound to look you up when he hit Grubstake. I was counting heavy on your knowing anything there was to know about Tommy's stay here."

Hobbs forked bacon out of a frying pan and onto the plates, the action mechanical, and sloshed coffee into tin cups. "So they got Tommy, too," he muttered. "Sam, there's something mighty wrong hereabouts. With outlaws in the hills and gold on the trails, it's natural that men are getting beefed. But tell me this: Why ain't anybody's bushwhacked body been found? Besides Chesty and Arizona and Tommy, some prospectors have disappeared likewise. But no bodies. What happens to 'em, Sam?"

"You tell me," Sam said. Reaching into his boot top, he fished out the key and extended it. "Ever see this before?"

Horseshoe puckered his face in bewilderment. "Looks like it might fit a padlock. Where'd you get it?"

"Tommy's horse came back to the ranch. With an empty saddle. I found this tied to the saddle blanket."

Horseshoe sat down and sawed at the bacon with a rusty knife. Sam ate mechanically. There was little appetite in him, but a man had to keep on doing the routine things.

Between mouthfuls, Horseshoe said: "I've got me an idea. These Snake Crick diggings have been rich, but this ain't been no Alder Gulch or Bannack. Now me, I'm just an old cowhand turned prospector; I ain't long on gold savvy, but I do know the Saddlebacks, which is more than a lot of these gold-crazy pilgrims do. Snake Crick rises in them hills, but it forks on the way down, and the fork is called Lost Crick on account of it loses itself in the cliff country north of here. Supposin' there's gold in Lost Crick, too? Supposin' somebody's found it and doesn't want the secret to get out to start a stampede in that direction? Maybe so, somebody's tryin' to scare folks out of this neck of the woods."

Sam picked up his sombrero from the floor and showed Horseshoe the bullet hole. "Somebody tried dusting me on the way in here this morning," he said. "That means that somebody's mighty touchy about trespassers in the Saddlebacks. But that could be Red McAffee and his boys. No, I'm thinking that Tommy and the others were beefed for whatever their saddlebags carried. Tommy's were missing when his horse came home. But tell me this. Did you see him at all? Did he sound like he was worried about anything that happened here?"

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Horseshoe screwed up his face for full recollection. "Tommy brought in the beef and turned it over to the butcher," he said. "He dropped in on me that same evening, talked awhile and said he guessed he'd see the sights and get an early start towards home in the morning. Me, I came up to the Red Nugget later and found him chinnin' at the bar with a feller. Say, come to think of it, it was the same feller he left with!"

Sam quickened with interest. "You mean Tommy didn't ride out alone?"

"I saw him outside the saloon near midnight," Hobbs went on.—"I'd invited him to bunk here, but he said that him and this jigger was takin' the same trail for a piece and that he'd decided to ride out by moonlight. That's all."

"This fellow he was with?" Sam said, his voice tense with eagerness. "What did he look like?"

"Harmless-lookin' jigger. That's why he didn't come to my mind when you first mentioned that Tommy had got into trouble. But, say, I can do better than describe him. I can fetch him here! I've seen him around camp several times since—just last night, for a fact. You wait here, Sam, while I look over the saloons. I'll be back inside of an hour with that gent."

Fired with eagerness, Horseshoe deserted his half-emptied plate, jammed on his battered old sombrero and was gone. Sam was half-minded to follow him, but a second thought convinced him that Horseshoe's strategy of going alone was better. If that gent who'd ridden out with Tommy had anything to cover, the fellow might be hesitant about talking to Sam Kingdom. Better to let Horseshoe lure the fellow here.

But excitement fired him now, and inactivity weighed heavily on him. He had finished his meal, done up the dishes and put the cabin in order, when he remembered his horse. In the press of events since his arrival in Grubstake, he had violated the first law of the cowboy; he had attended to his own needs ahead of his mount's.

His regret was genuine, and he led the cayuse to the makeshift livery stable, turned him over to a hostler, then made his way back to Horseshoe's cabin. The men of the diggings had deserted their claims for the night's festivities; they thronged the planking, and Sam studied faces as he elbowed among them, looking always for Tommy, yet knowing he would not find his brother here.

And so he came back to the cabin, and as soon as he stepped inside the doorway he knew that Horseshoe had also returned, for the oldster's battered hat lay on the floor, and Horseshoe had been wearing it when he'd left. The gray of twilight had mantled the gulch; there was little light but there was enough to show Sam that there'd been a wild struggle here.

The table had been overturned and crushed to kindling; the stove still stood, but the pipes had come down in a shapeless, sooty tangle. This was what Sam Kingdom saw, and anger and bitterness rode him. He'd pinned his hopes on Horseshoe's re-

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turn with the stranger who'd last seen Tommy. Horseshoe had returned all right, but only to disappear, to vanish as so many other cowmen had vanished from the midst of this accursed camp.

II

Sam Kingdom was the kind who'd started his ranch by working for another man, saving his pay, combing mavericks out of the brush to build his own herd, and then launching himself with this meager shoestring. Tommy, his younger brother, had come up from Texas to help him, and together they'd bucked blizzard and drought to build up the K-Gone-Crazy. It wasn't much of a ranch yet, but the sweat and saddle savvy of Sam Kingdom had gone into it, and it had a future, for Sam was that kind of man—used to fighting his way uphill, loyal always to his own breed and way.

And so, standing here in Horseshoe Hobbs' wrecked cabin and reading the obvious signs of the oldster's abduction, Sam's first sense of frustration gave way to the need for action. Here was a challenge, stern as the kind the land gave a fledgling rancher, and Sam Kingdom responded as he would always respond. There was indeed something almighty wrong in this boom camp. It had struck at his brother; now it had struck at his friend. Sam Kingdom was taking the trail.

He thought of the law of Grubstake, but only fleetingly. Lard Seton, the mammoth town marshal, obviously came at the beck and call of Oliver Curry of the Red Nugget, and though the saloon owner laid claim to civic interest, Sam hadn't made up his mind about that ill-matched pair. Until he could truly trust them, he'd string along alone.

Outside the cabin, he began cutting for sign. The darkness was swooping down from the Saddlebacks, and he had to use matches in his search, but the ground was spongy enough to tell its tale. Three men and three horses had approached Horseshoe's cabin; they'd had to wait a while, for there was the indentation of spiked boot heels where they had hunkered, and several cigarette butts to show how they'd passed the time.

Then they'd gone to the cabin, gotten Horseshoe and dragged him back here. Plenty of sign indicated that. Probably the oldster had been forced into a saddle, and one of the horses had carried double when they'd left. They'd headed in a general northerly direction, toward the hills, but the trail was soon lost in a tangle of hoofprints, for mounted men of the gulch had crossed and crisscrossed through this section during the day.

Sam turned back toward the cabin. Horseshoe Hobbs, born to the saddle, had fetched his cayuse to Grubstake with him, and Sam found the mount in a lean-to. Mindful that his own horse had followed a long trail today, Sam helped himself to Horseshoe's mount. He was tightening the saddle cinch when he heard the rasp of a boot sole just beyond the opening of the lean-to.

Sam melted into the shadows, his gun in his hand, wariness holding

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him tense. A man stood outlined in the opening, a small man who said softly: "Who's in there?"

"Me," Sam said and cocked his gun. "Just hoist them hands, mister, and sing your song."

The man obliged. "You're not the old man who lives here," he decided.

"I'm a friend of his," Sam said. "Who are you?"

"Fletcher Wyatt. You've heard of me?"

Sam sucked in his breath. "I reckon. As a bandit-busting federal marshal, you've got a wide rep, mister—providin' you're really Wyatt."

"Come out where we can see each other," the little man urged, still keeping his hands aloft. "I'll give you proof."

Sam still held his gun ready—he was trusting no man in this sinister camp—and herded his prisoner ahead of him into the cabin. Horseshoe's kerosene lamp sat upon a shelf and was still intact, and at Sam's order, the other got it aglow. The yellow light revealed the little man to be middle-aged and nondescript and not at all as Sam would have pictured the great Fletcher Wyatt. But there was a shield-shaped United States marshal's badge under his coat.

"My credentials are in my inside coat pocket," the man said. "Help yourself."

Sam took the papers and inspected them, and when he'd returned them he cased his gun. "Plumb sorry," he said. "This gold country has made me mighty jumpy. What can I do for you, marshal?"

"It's what *I* can do for *you* that counts," the other said. "You mentioned being a friend of the old fellow. I saw him packed off. I'm here working under cover to cut sign on the Red McAffee gang, and I was prowling the gulch at sundown when I found three jiggers toting the old gent to their horses. He was putting up a fight, and I tried to buy in. But one of them clouted me with a gun." He removed his sombrero and ran his hand through a thick shock of black hair. "It took the fight out of me. I managed to crawl away, but I heard one of them say: 'If anybody gives us chase and we get separated, we'll meet at Wigwam Rock.' That's a landmark to the north of here. I figgered you'd want to know. You're Sam Kingdom, I'm guessing. There's a heap of talk in the saloons about your arrival here, and what brought you."

Sam nodded. "Thanks for the information, Wyatt. I'll be heading for this Wigwam Rock."

The badge toter extended his hand. "I'd like to ride with you, but I've got my own trail to follow. Maybe it's the same trail, Kingdom, but my end of it's in the gulch. Leave sign for me, though. If you're not back in a week, say, I'll be looking for you."

Playing cards littered the floor, a deck which Horseshoe had probably used for solitaire. Picking up the cards, Sam stuffed them into his pocket. "I'll scatter these along the way," he said.

After a few questions about the

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specific location of Wigwam Rock, Sam was up into Horseshoe's saddle and taking the trail. It was mighty hard going at first; beyond the gulch the land tilted upward and was choked with evergreen. But the moon rose within an hour and Sam found an old game trail. He came to Wigwam Rock before midnight, came to find sign that the three riders he pursued had rested their horses here and had a smoke apiece.

The going became increasingly harder after that; the land had leveled off, but the black chaos of timber was thicker, and sometimes the moonlight failed to filter down, and Sam had to lead his horse and grope along. He was dropping cards behind him now, and he used many matches, but not fruitlessly, for he found sign that told him he was on the right trail—a bit of cloth, torn from a man's shirt by a low-sweeping branch, an occasional cigarette stub. The three abductors were riding with surety now, confident, apparently, that they'd put themselves beyond pursuit. But just when elation was growing within Sam, he reached the cliff.

A high, chalky barrier, it glistened whitely in the moonlight, and it ran to the east and west, seemingly insurmountable and with the timber growing to its very base. Sam remembered the cliff; his trail into Grubstake had skirted it, and it was somewhere in this vicinity that a bullet had bored through his hat. He could understand that now; it wasn't that he had been recognized, it was merely that whoever used this country didn't want strangers about, and that bullet had been a warning. Red McAffee and his outlaws? Possibly. But what did that owl-hoot crew want with an oldster like Horseshoe Hobbs?

A greater problem, and one calling for more immediate solving, was the cliff itself. Obviously the men he trailed, the men who'd headed steadily northward out of Grubstake, had veered at this point, turning either east or west. But which way? Sam threshed about in a wide circle, cutting for sign again, and it was nearly an hour before he was satisfied that the trail went westward.

The night was nearly gone now; the moon had faded. Sam had taken three times as long to cover a stretch of distance as he would have taken with ordinary daylight riding. But still he groped onward, waiting patiently for the first flush of daylight, looking for sign and leaving cards behind him. He ran out of matches, so he tied his horse to a bush, squatted on the ground and merely waited. He tried to sleep, but he only dozed, and he finally awoke from one fitful snatch of slumber to find the gray of a new dawn about him.

Into the saddle again, Sam moved along until it came to his weary senses that the trail had petered out. No riders had gone this far west, yet there'd been sign not far back. Sam shook his head, trying to clear it. Had the three with Horseshoe veered south again? But that didn't make sense. Turning about, Sam retraced his own steps, and shortly he picked up sign again. There

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wasn't much, for the ground here at the base of the cliff was rocky. But there was enough to give him an inkling of a tremendous and startling truth, and he studied the face of the cliff with a new interest.

The men he followed had vanished into the face of the cliff. Unbelievable as that was, there was no question about it, but Sam had to do a lot of looking before he spied the rift that had swallowed them. Approaching it cautiously, he found it wide enough to accommodate a mounted man, a narrow crevice cutting into the cliff's face at such an angle that it was scarcely visible from the outside.

Urging his mount into the rift, Sam saw that it wound tortuously. High above him was a small patch of sky; on either hand was the rocky wall.

Then, suddenly, he was through the rift, and he knew then that the cliff was not the sheer face of some inaccessible plateau, but a natural palisade cutting off a little basin. The bowl of it lay before him, gracefully cupped and spreading on to other distant cliffs to the north. Through this hidden basin snaked a creek that sparkled and danced, for the sun now stood high enough to look down into here; and along the creek worked many men at sluice boxes and rockers.

This was the sight Sam Kingdom saw, and because he was sweeping it with startled eyes, he failed to see the men who converged upon him. They had been waiting on either side of this inner end of the rift, and they had their hands on him and were hauling him from the saddle and snatching his gun away before he had a chance to make his fight.

He understood then, and his knowledge, coming too late, filled him with a burning bitterness. He'd been lured here like a sheep being tolled to the slaughter, and he'd fallen into the trap. Those three he'd followed had been expecting pursuit when they'd left Grubstake; Marshal Fletcher Wyatt had heard them say so. And like a blind, blundering fool, Sam Kingdom had walked into their arms!

III

Four men had dragged Sam from his saddle, and they bound his hands behind him and propelled him forward. On this side of the creek cutting down through the basin was a small corral with perhaps a dozen horses stomping inside, a bigger corral that was empty, a small wooden shack, and a row of four canvas tents.

It was toward these tents that Sam was herded, and as he stumbled along nearer the creek, he saw that the dozen men who toiled with shovels and rockers were naked to the waist and that two men with rifles guarded them. There was no talk among the workers, and the guards, too, held to a surly silence that made the whole scene seem unreal. One of the workers was Horseshoe Hobbs, and another—Sam's heart gave a mighty leap—was Tommy Kingdom.

Thus had Sam Kingdom found his brother, but the irony was that Sam himself was also a prisoner.

Tommy, looking up and locking

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his eyes with Sam's, made no sign of recognition. If there was anything in that glance, it was a mute warning, an appeal for silence.

At the tents Sam was silently stripped to the waist and as silently searched. He held his breath then, remembering the key in his boot, for finding Tommy here alive had suddenly made the key very significant. That key was likely tied up with this hidden basin, and Sam breathed easier when the search didn't extend to his boots.

"Just what kind of a game are you galoots playing?" he demanded with a show of bluster.

One of his captors, a big man with a cast in his left eye, said: "We knew you trailed us out of Grubstake. In fact, we fetched the old galoot here as bait to lure you on. Just the same, we didn't ask you to come snoopin'. So now that you're here, you're here to stay. Fix him up with some tools, Ike, and take him to the creek."

Ike, a small, wolfish-looking man, nodded. "Come on, feller," he ordered. "You're now working for the Red McAffee Mining Company. There's no wages and no future in it, but it won't do any good to kick."

"I haven't eaten since last night," Sam said.

He was given a hunk of meat which he found hard to identify, part of a loaf of lumpish bread, and a cup of bitter coffee. Then he was taken to the creek and put to work shoveling pay gravel into a rocker. The equipment was all crudely made, Sam noticed, and the methods were primitive, but with a dozen men at work, a sizable amount of gold was likely taken from this basin each day.

Sam Kingdom made the thirteenth slave worker, and of the others he knew four—Tommy and Horseshoe Hobbs, of course, and Chesty Grinnel and Arizona Nevil, who also brought beef down to the boom camp and failed to return. Of the other eight, seven were placer men who'd vanished from Grubstake, or so Sam guessed as he studied the surety with which they worked this equipment which was so alien to him. The eighth man he found hard to peg. The fellow was tall and, although he was silver-haired he looked wiry for his age. He had the lean hips of a rider, but Sam couldn't be sure.

But there was much that Sam *could* understand that had been unfathomable before. This, then, was what had become of the men who'd vanished from Grubstake. They hadn't been waylaid and murdered as some had supposed; old Horseshoe had suspected the truth when he'd observed that no bodies had been found.

Red McAffee's men held sway here, and doubtless they'd watched the trails out of Grubstake for men who were carrying money, but the outlaws had had another purpose as well. There was gold here, and the outlaw crew was getting it out by the quickest and cheapest method at their command. These half-naked men who worked the creek were slaves to the gun, and Sam could guess their fate when their usefulness ended.

That still didn't explain why Tommy Kingdom's horse had come home with a key tied to the saddle

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blanket, but there was no chance to ask Tommy questions. The brothers were working a great distance apart, and, besides, Sam remembered Tommy's mute appeal for silence. These outlaws likely knew Sam's identity. They'd heard he was in Grubstake to cut sign on his brother, and they'd decided to capture him before he succeeded. Horseshoe Hobbs had been fetched as bait; they'd admitted that part of it. If they also knew who Tommy was, as they likely did, they'd be keeping a careful eye on the pair of them.

And so Sam Kingdom toiled through the long, blazing summer day, beset by questions that had no answers, weary from the sleepless night before, aching from the demands put on seldom-used muscles. The heat was the worst. The day was oppressively hot and the air so heavy that Sam wasn't surprised to see thunderheads gathering about the distant, higher peaks of the Saddlebacks in mid-afternoon, and soon a pall of angry black veiled the western sky. Shortly thereafter he found that Horseshoe had worked near to him.

"I certainly tangled my twine at trying to help you out of a tight," Sam said from the corner of his mouth.

"My luck was bad, too," the oldster said ruefully. "After I left the cabin last night, I described that jigger I'd seen with Tommy to every barkeep in Grubstake, but I couldn't find him. Then I came back to the cabin and was jumped. I figger the fellow is one of the outlaws. He got wind I was trailing him, got his pards to grab me, and at the same time they worked to toll you into a trap."

"Never mind," Sam told him. "Our chore now is to get away."

"This is Lost Crick, Sam," Horseshoe said. "Remember what I was tellin' you about thinkin' maybe there was gold here? Only I was wrong about these fellers trying a scare so as to keep folks from stampeding here. I didn't guess a half of their deviltry."

One of the guards who restlessly roamed the creek bank suddenly hovered behind them. "Quit that jaw waggin'," he ordered with unwonted savagery.

Sam's hand tightened around the shovel, but he knew it would be suicide to give vent to anger. He could understand the outlaws' no-talk decree. With six men holding thirteen prisoners, captives outnumbered captors, even though the slaves were unarmed. By keeping silence among them, McAffee's crew made sure the workers had no chance to scheme up any concerted action. Sam turned back to his work, realizing that he could only bide his time.

They were allowed to cease work only when the premature dusk of this storm-threatened day made it impossible for them to continue. By then the older men such as Horseshoe and Arizona Nevil and that silvery-haired unknown were hardly able to stand.

All were herded to a small fire that had been built before one of the tents, and here they were served some unidentifiable kind of stew. It put

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new vigor in Sam. Afterwards one of the guards went to the little shack and fetched a huge bundle of blankets. These were doled out to the captives, who were then sent into the big, empty corral.

This corral, seen close up, proved to be of the peeled-pole variety common to the hill country, but it was higher than any designed merely to hold horses. It reared a dozen feet upward and barbed wire had been entwined between the horizontal poles and strung liberally along the tops. Inside this corral, and with the gate swung shut, the workers wrapped themselves in blankets and sprawled upon the ground. The guards vanished into the tents, save one who began patrolling around the corral, and Sam, feeling the first spattering drops of rain, knew that the prisoners were in for a wet, miserable night.

The thunder came then, rolling across the sky and crashing about the peaks, and the rain began a steady beating. Sam drew his blanket closer about him. He'd played the game patiently today, having no choice, and he was remembering the trail of playing cards he'd left for Marshal Fletcher Wyatt. There was solace in the thought that rescue might come, but he realized that though Wyatt was a little man with a mighty big reputation, still the marshal might be trapped just as easily as he, himself, had been. No, a man couldn't stake his chances on another man's luck and skill. And if today was a sample of the existence to be led in this hidden basin, Sam was of a mind to run any risk to escape. Such was his thought, when he suddenly found Tommy beside him.

There was no greeting between them; there was no time for that, apparently. Breathlessly, Tommy merely whispered: "The key? Did you fetch the key?"

"It's in my boot," Sam said. "They didn't find it."

His brother's fingers closed on his arm, cautioning him to silence. When the thunder roared again, Tommy had his lips close to Sam's ear. "One reason they keep a guard at night is to make sure we don't do any plotting together. Play it careful now. Do your talking when the thunder's the loudest."

Sam thought he could make out the moving figure of the guard beyond the poles, but he wasn't sure.

"Each one of the guards carries a key," Tommy said at the next opportunity. "They fit the padlock on that little shack, yonder. One of 'em dropped a key the first day I was fetched here. I picked it up, and the fellow must have had an extra, because no search was ever made. There's rifles stored in that shack, Sam. They keep them there when they're not using them for guarding us."

Sam's interest quickened. "How did you get that key out of here?"

Tommy waited for the thunder. "After I'd been here about a week, I scaled the fence one night when the guard made the mistake of dozing. I should have gone to the shack first and got me a gun, but instead I sneaked to the horse corral and got

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gear onto my own cayuse which they'd fetched here when they grabbed me out of Grubstake. This camp came alive just about the time I got into the saddle."

"Yes?"

"I made it through the cliff, but they know this country better than me, Sam. An hour after I was beyond the cliff, I knew they had me surrounded and were closing in. I turned my horse loose then, and lit out afoot in the opposite direction, figuring I might fool 'em. They nailed me, but they never got the horse. I was countin' on that jughead lopin' for our old K-Gone-Crazy. And I'd tied the key to his blanket with a saddle string I'd pulled off, so they wouldn't find it on me. Didn't figger it could mean much to you, but it was the only kind of word I could send."

"It panned out better than you thought, kid," Sam told him. "We've got the key, and we've got our chance. Tonight. Might be a month of Sundays before we'd get a storm like this to cover up our play. Is that barbed wire so tough?"

"I don't know," Tommy said. "They took to stringin' it around the corral after they'd fetched me back. They'd learned that a man could get out of this corral pretty easy, the way it was."

"And you can bet that none of the guards has been doing any dozing since," Sam decided. "Think we could talk to any of the other fellers? Old Horseshoe, for instance?"

"Safer not to," Tommy told him. "The guard might catch on if too many of us started moving around. Whatever play we make, Sam, we'd better make it alone."

Lightning flared, illuminating the basin, and in that weird, chalky light, Sam lifted his eyes to the cruel wire strung along the corral top. When thunder roared in the lightning's wake, he said: "We'll make our play when the thunder booms again. You head for the north wall of the corral; I'll take the west side. Here—" He fished the key out of his boot and pressed it into Tommy's palm. "Your job will be to get at those guns and fetch 'em back here to the boys in the corral. Me, I'll take care of the guard and anybody else who hears us and comes looking. Got that straight?"

"You bet," Tommy whispered.

They waited. All around them the rain droned monotonously, and Sam strained his eyes and thought he marked the sentry's slow movement. Tommy was pressed so close to him that he could feel the tension in the youngster's body, and he wondered if he himself were as taut. The thunder had been repeating itself with monotonous regularity, but now there was no sound save the rain. Then the lightning came again, closer this time, dazzling in its brightness. After it, the night was inkier for that sudden flare, and the thunder was an ear-splitting explosion.

"Now!" Sam cried and knew that his voice was lost in the thunder's roar. Then he was upon his feet and racing for the wall of the corral. It was a case of now or never.

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IV

Between Sam and the corral wall were the huddled forms of some of the captives; Sam stumbled over one of these, wringing a curse from the startled man, and then he was up and to the poles. He climbed frantically, feeling the barbed wire tear at his hands, but he was immune to pain in his excitement. Time was what counted now—time to get over the corral top before the sound of his ascent carried to the guard. He gained the top pole, found himself tangled in the tearing wire, and he was working desperately to free himself when the lightning flared again.

Just for an instant the land was vividly lighted, and in that instant Sam saw Tommy had gotten over the corral and was sprinting toward the shack. But the guard was directly below Sam, and the guard had spied Sam and was lifting his rifle. The lightning winked out; the roar of the gun was lost in the roar of thunder, and a bullet nicked the lobe of Sam's ear. He marked the rifle flash and leaped.

It was a blind leap in the murky darkness, but when he lighted, the guard went down beneath him, and Sam clawed for the rifle and wrenched it away. Then he fought free of the guard and swung the rifle by its barrel. Felt it hit against something solid, and the guard went down.

For a moment Sam stood there in the wild downpour, his heart pounding, his chest heaving. He wasn't sure whether he'd been hit; there was blood on him, but that came from the wounds the wire had given him, he soon realized. The guard was either unconscious or dead, but the inmates of the corral, aroused by the rifle shot, were unwittingly raising a clamor that could be heard above the storm.

"Quiet!" Sam barked. "We're going to free you!"

Too late. The lightning came again, and Sam saw men tumbling from the tents. Those men might have placed their rifles in the locked shack, but they'd kept their six-guns with them, for shots were roaring as the outlaws boiled out into the night. Sam fired among them as the darkness descended, fired blindly and with the frantic hope that he might stay them for a few added minutes. And then he was running toward the shack.

"Tommy!" he cried, for silence could serve him no longer.

"Here!" Tommy shaped up in the darkness. "I've got me an armload of rifles!"

"Pass them through the bars of the corral!" Sam ordered. "And get that gate open, if you can. I'll try keeping McAffee's men busy a while longer."

Boots were slogging toward them; the outlaws were firing at random, and Sam went side-stepping away, shooting as he went. Someone cursed and went sprawling; someone else tripped over the first man. But there were five guns against Sam, and they could use his rifle flash as a target. One, clearer-headed than the others, was bawling orders, and Sam wondered how long he could last now. But suddenly the night was alive

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with men—a roaring pack of men—and Sam realized that Tommy must have gotten the corral gate open. The captives were loose!

And those captives were armed now, armed by Tommy. They had toiled long hours under the menace of a gun, they had been worked like beasts and now their hour of vengeance had struck. They were everywhere, seeking out their captors, heedless of risk, and there wasn't much to it after that. Sam ceased shooting, unable to distinguish friend from foe in the darkness, but there came a time when the lightning flared to reveal no one left to fight. After that the half-naked men huddled together, all talking at once, and Sam cut through the uproar.

"Let's take stock," he shouted. "Are you sure we got all of them?"

No man of Red McAffee's crew was left alive. But quick tally proved also that the fight had taken its toll among the former captives, too. One was dead—the lean, silver-haired man who'd aroused Sam's interest at the creek. Several had been wounded. And most of the elation of this night's triumph went out of Sam when he discovered that Tommy had been the hardest hit among the wounded. A bullet had seared the youngster's scalp, and the best that could be done was to bandage him, along with the others.

"We might as well sit out this storm," Sam decided then. "Come morning we'll bury the dead and light out for Grubstake. Anybody know the name of the elderly gent who stopped a bullet for keeps?"

Nobody did. The silver-haired man had been one of the first captives, apparently, and the no-talk decree of McAffee's crew had kept the others from becoming acquainted with him. There was nothing to do but place a blanket over the fellow, and then they all crowded into the tents to await the dawn. It was a long night, and Sam got little sleep. By midnight the storm had moved westward, but Tommy was glassy-eyed and obviously in pain, and Sam toyed with the thought of trying to reach the boom camp and a doctor that night.

Common sense dictated against such a try. But at the first crack of dawn Sam had a burial party at work; the men who'd used shovels to toil as captives now used these same shovels to bury their captors. As the dead were being bedded down, Sam asked: "Which one of these was McAffee himself?"

"None," a Grubstake miner told him. "Me, I've never seen McAffee, but the reward dodgers all mention his having flaming red hair. That's how he got his nickname."

"The clothes they took away from us are in the shack," another remarked. "Me, I'm going back to camp dressed up. And the silvery-haired jigger is going to get buried in decent style. I'll find his coat and vest."

When Sam went to have his last look at the one captive who'd been killed, he stared long and intently, for the dead man, garbed now, had assumed a new personality. Finally Sam called Horseshoe Hobbs over.

"You've been around the Saddle-

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back country longer than most," Sam said. "Ever see this fellow before?"

Horseshoe took a moment to study the man. "Reckon not," he answered finally. "What's next, Sam? The gold the outlaws got from the crick was stored in that shack, and the boys aim to divide it up. Likewise the beef money that Tommy and the others lost has been recovered."

"The important job is to get Tommy and the other wounded to a sawbones," Sam declared. "See that the horses get saddled pronto, old-timer. We're heading for Grubstake."

But first the creek was staked out; the men who'd toiled here for outlaw gold were now staking claims to the hidden bonanza, and Horseshoe came to Sam later to report that he'd posted stakes for the Kingdom brothers. But Sam wasn't interested at the moment. Tommy was delirious now, lost to his surroundings and babbling of Texas days, and all the gold in the Saddlebacks wouldn't have kept Sam from the trail.

There were horses enough; some had belonged to McAffee's men, some were those of the captives; and soon a tight-mouthed cavalcade was winding through the rift and heading south toward Grubstake. Tommy had to be supported in his saddle, and Sam was glad that there were men along who knew the country and could find the shortest route. They covered the distance in far less time than it had taken Sam to reach the cliff, and it was not yet noon when they came riding into Grubstake. Thereafter there was a wild rush for the recorder's office to legalize the Lost Creek claims, but others agreed to file by proxy for the wounded, so Horseshoe and Sam accompanied Tommy and other bandaged men to the doctor's cabin.

"Your brother's going to be raving with fever for a while," the doctor told Sam when he had made his examination. "But he'll come through sound as a dollar. You've nothing to worry about."

Sam sighed with relief, and Horseshoe said: "A good ending, Sam. We'll all come through hide whole, and I can get you honest men to work your claims on shares. You and Tommy can build up your ranch fast now. You'll be lighting out soon?"

"Maybe," Sam said, his eyes grim. "There's one last chore, old-timer. I want the kingpin of the crew that worked men at gun point. And he's here in Grubstake, I'm mighty sure, keeping his eye out for fresh recruits for his slave crew. I'm cutting sign on Red McAffee."

Horseshoe's eyes widened. "Know where you'll find him?"

"I think so. And you can help me, old-timer. I'm finding Marshal Fletcher Wyatt and taking him with me to the Red Nugget Saloon. Plant yourself out there somewhere and keep an eye on me. When I head into the saloon, give me five minutes, then come inside and hunt me up. When you find me, and I'll likely be with Oliver Curry, say: 'Sam, the doctor wants you over at his cabin.

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That silvery-haired gent has recovered consciousness and is talking.' Can you remember that?"

"Easy enough," Horseshoe said with a shake of his head. "But I ain't sure it makes sense."

V

Sam had gotten his own gun from the shack in the hidden basin, and he eased it out of its holster and back again. Then he went striding along the planking of Grubstake's straggling street, elbowing among the flannel-shirted men of the diggings. It would not have been strange if he had found himself stared at with interest and awe, for the story had gotten around, told by the captives who'd returned, the fantastic story of that hidden basin. But Grubstake had no time for hero worship today; Grubstake was starting a stampede. A crowd milled before the livery stable, hurriedly renting horses, and here Sam found the little man with the U.S. marshal's badge.

"Howdy, Wyatt," Sam said. "You racing to stake out a claim, too?"

The badge toter extended his hand. "Not me, Kingdom. But I'll have to look around that basin before I make my report. That's about all there's left for me to do. The camp's buzzing with talk of what happened. Seems you've tacked the hides of the McAffee gang to the wall for me."

"All but the kingpin," Sam said. "Would you like to make an arrest, Wyatt, to put into your report? Come along to the Red Nugget with me."

"Oliver Curry's place?"

Sam nodded. "I want to palaver with the one man who was so anxious to get me out of Grubstake that he offered to pay me to leave."

Wordlessly the little man placed himself at Sam's elbow, and together they went striding toward the Red Nugget. They came into the place to find that stampede fever had swept it almost clean. Bar and gaming tables stood empty, and even the bartenders were gone, but Curry was here. Lean and black-garbed, he stood with his back to the bar, and beside him stood the mountainous Lard Seton. Seton only nodded, but Curry smiled affably when he sighted Sam.

"You've certainly played hob with my town, Kingdom," he said. "All Grubstake's moving out. I've just been debating whether to lock the place and join the rush."

"We won't keep you long, Curry," Sam said. "We're looking for Red McAffee."

Seton looked down at his badge. "You don't think he'd be showing himself here, do you?"

"Why not?" Sam countered, but he was speaking to Curry. "From all I've heard, few people have ever seen McAffee. About all the law has to go on is his description, and that says he's red-headed. A bottle of dye could take care of that. You see, Curry, *you* could be Red McAffee as well as anybody."

The affability went out of Curry, and he colored angrily. "Now, see here, Kingdom . . ." he spluttered.

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It was a moment when anything could happen. At Sam's elbow the little badge toter had stiffened; Sam was watching from the corner of his eye, and he knew that one word now, one movement, and there could be gunplay. And in spite of Grubstake's no-gun decree, all four here were armed.

Curry's anger had choked him, and Sam took a swift, sideward step, and that was the moment when the batwings parted to admit Horseshoe Hobbs. The oldster stood there for a moment blinking.

"Sam, the doctor wants you . . ." His voice trailed away then; his eyes widening. "Sam!" he shouted. "That's the jigger I was lookin' for the other night! *The one who rode out with Tommy when Tommy disappeared!*"

He was pointing a shaking finger, pointing it at the man who wore the badge of United States Marshal Fletcher Wyatt, and that man was clearing his gun from leather. But Sam Kingdom was moving faster. He got his own gun free just as the little man fired, but the man made the mistake of firing at Horseshoe. The bullet thunked into the batwings, the badge toter spun, sensing the menace of Sam Kingdom and got in a shot that breathed hotly past Sam's cheek. But Sam was triggering too, and the badge toter took one slow step forward and went spilling into the sawdust.

"Thunderation!" Curry breathed from where he and Seton flattened themselves against the bar. "Just what is all this?"

"Red McAffee," Sam said and nudged the fallen man with his toe. "That black hair came out of a dye bottle. McAffee was handling the Grubstake end of his outlaw deal, and handling it with a marshal's badge and credentials, but they weren't his. Sorry I had to give you a scare, Curry. I couldn't be positive about McAffee, so I wanted to bring him some place where I could speak my piece about dyed hair without letting him realize it was *him* I was suspicious of. At the same time, I was watching his face as I talked. And his face told me I'd hit the truth."

"I think I savvy now," Horseshoe said. "I was to force the showdown by busting in here and pretending that a certain silver-haired gent was alive and talking. That would have scared McAffee into action. But I started the guns banging a little previous by recognizing McAffee as the man who'd been with Tommy."

"Sure," said Sam. "We buried Marshal Fletcher Wyatt in the hidden basin this morning. I noticed that the sun had faded the real Wyatt's vest, but there was one spot that was darker than the rest—a spot shield-shaped like a marshal's badge. You see, Curry, McAffee had captured Wyatt, the same as he'd captured so many others, and was using him to work Lost Creek up there behind the cliff. But McAffee, meanwhile, was passing himself off as Fletcher Wyatt."

"No wonder he got jumpy when I started asking for him in the saloons, the night you hit camp, Sam," Horseshoe said. "That's why he got hold of those three hellions

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of his, which same must have been hiding out in the timber close by, and had them tote me out of camp. And McAffee knew you'd take my trail, which meant he'd get rid of two nosey customers."

Lard Seton stared with mouth agape while Oliver Curry sleeved sweat from his face.

"It's all coming a little fast for me," Curry said, "but I'm glad I was able to be of service. We'll likely have a new camp now, Kingdom, up beyond the cliff. We'll be needing beef there, too. Can we count on you?"

"You bet," Sam said. "Gold mining will only be a side line of the Kingdom brothers."

"And I'll be eating the dust of the drag when that beef comes down from the K-Gone-Crazy," Horseshoe announced. "Me, I got cured of gold fever up on Lost Crick. Come on, Sam, let's get back to the doctor's and see how Tommy's doing. The three of us should be saddling up for the home trail mighty soon!"

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY

L. L. Foreman

feels it isn't too bright, these days, to admit having been in World War I, "'cause folks figure you must be a grandpa." Nevertheless he spent his seventeenth birthday as a wounded prisoner in a German prison camp (he fought with the Irish Rifles). Time out for repairs, Foreman headed for Australia without reckoning on the spell of the American Southwest. New Mexico's magnificent scenery, Southwestern-style clothes, 'dobe houses, Mexican food, tequila with salt, Indians, bright colors and all things "old and mellow and genuine" sold him on Santa Fe as a home, a town "I like better than any other place anywhere. You couldn't run me out of here with a shotgun," he adds defiantly. When not busy turning out major Westerns, L. L. is active working, as he puts it, with his hands. Likes to build furniture, repair machinery and make copper and silver Spanish jewelry. Rifle and pistol shooting are also hobbies, but a quiet game of chess, which he admits he plays with more enjoyment than skill, is his real idea of relaxation.

The Preacher Devlin stories have always been events for W. S. readers. "The original character, around whom I built The Preacher," Foreman tells us, "was an Irish cop in Belfast, Ireland, where I grew up. And was he tough! Charming rascals, out for all they can get, but who so often come clean in a tight, have appealed to me, too, and Don Ricardo, the Preacher's would-be-Nemesis, is the epitome of such types I've known here and there."

So hold on to your sombreros, everybody, and watch these members of the gun-swift gentry tangle in RENEGADES' REVEILLE, coming in our August issue! There'll also be action-packed thrillers by Giff Cheshire, Frank Richardson Pierce, Rolland Lynch, S. Omar Barker—plus many other features and your service departments.

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GUN WOLF, KILL NO MORE!

by RALPH YERGEN

Hardware was Syl Gurney's line but the kind of business Packrat drummed up for him could be handled only with a blasting six-gun

WHEN it happened for the third time, Syl Gurney began to wonder if this whole Arizona town had gone crazy. He halted on the sidewalk and scratched his curly rust-colored hair. Certainly there was nothing in Syl Gurney's appearance to merit such awe on the part of the Packrat populace.

This pilgrim from the north was short of stature and rather chunkily built. His face was broad and freckled, his eyes greenish gray. The Colt .45 at his thigh appeared no different from ten thousand others. Previous to this April day, he had never made a footprint in Packrat's dust, yet somehow he seemed to exert a strange influence on the town's dwellers.

Syl watched a strapping, brute-faced fellow swagger down the middle of the sidewalk, forcing smaller men to take to the gutter. When the approaching hoodlum spotted Syl, he halted and stared like a man suddenly confronted by a hungry cougar. Abruptly, he sidetracked to the tie rail, his eyes studiously on the row of dozing broncs.

"Howdy, stranger," Syl said affably, in a voice marked by a soft, rasping quality.

The hoodlum paled about the gills,

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but did not raise his eyes. Syl passed on along the walk, more puzzled than ever. Again it had happened. Even the town toughs were avoiding him as if he had some mysterious disease.

His drummer friend had mentioned no such unfriendly attitude when he persuaded Syl to sell his Wyoming hardware business and to head south to Arizona. The drummer had painted a golden harvest awaiting the enterprising merchant who first invaded the hardware field in Packrat.

Syl had ridden into town earlier in the day. After stabling his horse at the Lily Petal Livery, he had advanced to the Arizona House where he had registered "S. J. Gurney," in his broad scrawl. He had noticed the bald-headed clerk's eyes bulging, but considered it only a natural mannerism. After washing and shaving, he had rested a couple of hours and then decided to make a brief inspection before dusk bottled the town.

Now as Syl approached a group of conversing men, they closed up like clams. He was on the point of asking just who was locoed, himself or the natives, when he spied a drab-faced man with a star glittering brightly on his shirt front moving toward him.

The lawman's chin was grimly set, but his face had a rather sickly look as if he were being prodded forward by an invisible six-gun stuck against the back of his neck.

Syl waited uncertainly, and the lawman spoke in a taut voice. "I'm Jack Carse, the town marshal. Packrat wants you to *sabe*, Gurney, that this here is a plumb peaceable burg. We won't stand for no gunplay."

"Gunplay?" Syl echoed, in his husky tone. "What made you figger I was itchin' to sling lead?"

"Don't get the wrong idee, Gurney," the lawman interrupted hastily. "I ain't accusin' you of nothin'. Just wanted to give you a little warnin' that this town don't stand for rough stuff."

"Listen here, marshal," Syl retorted. "Hardware is my line. All I want is to start a—"

"Forget them idees, Gurney!" Carse cut in abruptly. "If you don't start nothin', nobody will start nothin' with you. Like I said, Packrat is hell for keepin' the peace. We ain't had a killin' here since January. And we ain't been feelin' the need. So just hold that there trigger finger, Gurney, and we'll get along *bueno*."

Exasperated, Syl's tone grew explosive. "Listen, blast it! Just what did I ever do to your confounded town. This is the first time I ever set a hoof in it, and everybody acts like locoed sage hens. I come here on business. I—"

"Now don't get riled, Gurney!" the marshal blurted hastily. He darted a quick glance along the walk as if he were looking for help. But the group of men had vanished. He gulped and continued: "Just keep your shirt on. I ain't aimin' to tell you what to do. I'm just puttin' in a word for law and order. That's all." He spun and legged it across the street.

Syl shrugged. He was growing

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more and more baffled. He wondered if Packrat was mistaking him for some other Gurney. His best sources of information, he decided, would be barbers and bartenders. Not in need of a haircut or shave, he sauntered through the batwings of a sizable adobe establishment advertised in garish letters as The Hogtrough.

An abrupt hush fell on the interior as Syl strode toward the saloon bar. Men moved quickly out of his path. The pig-whiskered barkeep stared at him in trancelike silence.

"Beer," Syl ordered.

The barkeep's hands mechanically thrust a small glass and a bottle of bourbon across the bar.

Syl gazed at the ninety-proof label and then at the barkeeper. "Does that stuff pass for beer in this town?" he queried mildly.

The bartender's blue eyes bulged. Hastily he drew a schooner of foaming suds and shoved it at Syl with a mumbled apology.

"Nice business you got here," Syl commented pleasantly.

"Tol'able," the bartender replied.

"Seems like the burg's sort of jittery today."

The bewhiskered barkeep was silent.

"Reckon this Gurney hombre who just blew in must be hell-on-wheels," persisted Syl.

"I reckon," the bartender agreed.

Syl sipped the beer. "People must figger he'll soon be startin' a gun rampage."

"I reckon," was the uneasy reply.

"You savvy the dope on this Gurney jigger!"

"I reckon."

"How about lettin' me in on it, pardner?"

The barkeeper suddenly grew red in the face. He seized a sealed fifth of Scotch and rolled it across the bar. "Here," he spluttered. "Have a bottle on the house."

Syl heaved a hopeless sigh and shook his head. "No. I'm addled enough already." He wheeled and left the saloon.

Hungry, he crossed to the Gravy Pot restaurant and entered. As in the saloon, people stopped talking and stared as he selected a seat at the end of the counter.

A blond-haired girl came up to take his order. She was small, and a spotless white apron trimly fitted her curved figure. As Syl gazed into her wide blue eyes, a dizzy feeling gripped him. Here, without a doubt, was the girl he had always dreamed about but whom he could never believe existed. He ordered a steak, and promptly forgot about the queer attitude of other Packrat dwellers.

The girl did not appear to be afraid, but she regarded Syl so gravely that it disturbed him. He wanted to see her smile, but she remained soberly thoughtful. Listening to the other customers give their orders, he discovered that her name was Helen Trask and when she brought his dessert, he ventured a question.

"Do you . . . do you like working here, Miss Trask?"

She said, "Oh, yes," and her voice

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was soft and warm. And then she was walking briskly away.

Syl left a four-bit tip under his plate, paid the cashier, and went out to the dusk-filled street. With mixed feelings he sauntered up toward the hotel.

Now, for sure, he knew he somehow had to destroy the illusions the townsmen had built up around him. Somehow he had to get into their good graces. For it was no longer just a matter of entering a profitable business here in Packrat. The blond-haired girl, Helen Trask, must know him as himself, a good-natured hardware merchant, harmless and human.

As he headed toward the livery at the far end of town to see that his horse was properly cared for, smoky dusk robed the buildings and lamplight gleamed from the windows. Cowboys were drifting in from the range for an evening at cards and liquor. On a vacant lot, a group of youngsters was playing "outlaw and sheriff."

Syl wandered between rows of cottonwood trunks on his way to the stable's rear door. Here the deep shadows concealed him, and his footsteps were soundless in the sod. Abruptly the dim outlines of men loomed before him, and he heard a subdued voice.

"Keep them paws up high, hombre."

Syl discerned three figures in the shadows squarely in front of him. One was training a six-gun on the ribs of a stooped man. Another was fumbling at the same man's pockets.

Syl was sure none of them had seen him approach. He slid his .45 from its holster and called out in his husky voice.

"What in thunder is boilin' over here?"

Two of the men jerked as if prodded with a red-hot poker.

"Yipes!" one of them yelped "It's Wheez Gurney!"

"Gurney!" the other echoed. He dropped his gun and galloped into the darkness. His companion sped in the opposite direction, leaving the bent figure standing alone.

Syl scratched his head. "Seems like them fellers are in a powerful hurry all of a sudden. Did they hook your roll, stranger?"

The stooped man hobbled forward on barrel-stave legs, peering into Syl's face. "Nope. Thanks to you, Gurney. All it took was that there voice of your'n to scare the lyin' daylights out of them two sneaks. I was totin' a hull week's wages, too. Old Sam, the livery

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boss, just got through payin' me off not more'n ten minutes ago."

Syl recognized the man as the hostler who had cared for his horse at the stable. "Reckon you got that there nag of mine bedded down in good shape?" he queried.

"Cozier'n a coot," the hostler assured him. "Come on over to my shack, Gurney. I'll set up the drinks for your savin' my grub money tonight. Mebby some other folks don't care for your company but you put yourself ace-high with Axlegrease Long."

Syl accepted gratefully. Here was a chance to obtain some real information on his status in Packrat.

Axlegrease Long lived in a small but tidy 'dobe on a side street near the Gravy Pot. The oldster was sun-dried and lean, with a fringe of white hair about his shiny bald scalp. A flowing white mustache and bushy brows made him resemble the old man of the mountains. But there was a piercing quality about his steel-blue eyes which age had not dimmed.

Syl accepted a bottle of cold beer while Long poured himself a stiff hooker of rye whiskey. As Syl drank, he related his true purpose in visiting Packrat and his strange reception.

Axlegrease Long planted his heels on the cook stove. "Reckon it's your voice as much as your monicker, Gurney," he said thoughtfully. "If you come from Wyoming like you say, it ain't queer you never heard of Wheez Gurney. The border is his stamping grounds. He's as rough and tough an hombre as ever cracked a cap. They say he'll walk down the street, and if he takes a dislikin' to some yahoo, he'll stop him and cuss him out till the jigger draws on him. Then it's another funeral in town. And it ain't Wheez Gurney's. They claim he could give the devil the bulge and put three slugs in him before hell could raise a stink."

Long got up and rammed a gnarled finger at Syl. "Looky here, Gurney—this is what they say about you. They claim there's only one place you ever drill a man and that's right there." He shoved his finger to the exact middle of Syl's chest.

"Yessir. Right in the ticker," he continued. "That's where Wheez Gurney hits 'em every time. And if he don't salivate a man once a week he gets off his feed. He lives to kill and kills to live. And he's got every star toter in three States plumb buffaloed. That's why you ain't 'zactly welcome in Packrat."

"You mean this Wheez jigger talks foggy like me?" Syl queried.

"Reckon as how. I never seen nor heerd him. Neither did anybody else in Packrat. But the story got around he was tired of treein' all the border towns and was headed this way."

Things began to shape more clearly in Syl's mind. If this hated killer not only carried the same name as himself, but had a like huskiness of voice, no wonder Packrat thought they were both the same man.

"I got this raspberry tone when I was fourteen," Syl explained. "Some clumsy cow-town doctor whit-

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tled out my tonsils and must have sliced part of my talkin' machinery along with 'em."

"Mebby you ain't Wheez Gurney," Long said, his voice still rather doubtful, "but you'll have a hell of a time makin' people in Packrat believe you ain't."

Syl's unenviable reputation did not affect his appetite, and the next morning found him ensconced in the Gravy Pot. His pulse speeded alarmingly when he saw Helen Trask's blond head. And then she was before him, trim and fresh in starched gingham, awaiting his order.

"Ham and hen berries and a double stack of hots," he said, and tried unsuccessfully to think of some brilliant comment to make about the weather.

When Helen brought the food, she hesitated a moment, then spoke impulsively. "Mister Gurney, I can't believe you're the cold-hearted killer they say you are. You look human. Surely there's some decency in you. I don't believe you're as bad as you're painted."

Syl blinked. "Lady, you are altogether mistaken. I mean I'm not . . . I mean it's all a bad . . ."

"But you have one kind spot in your heart, I know," Helen went on hurriedly, as a flood of new customers engulfed the tables. "Don't you ever consider reforming? Don't you ever think about settling down to some honest occupation? You must have good qualities—if you'd only give them a chance to develop."

"But . . . but you don't savvy. Hardware is my line. All I . . ."

"Hardware!" she echoed severely. "Guns. Must guns always be your life? Won't you try to conquer this obsession? I know I'm being a fool—talking this way. But you appear to have such possibilities, if only you'd turn to some peaceful pursuit. Please try to understand me, Mister Gurney."

Before Syl could reply, she hurried to serve the customers who lined the farther end of the counter.

Syl shrugged. What was the use of trying to explain? He was a poor talker at best, always saying the wrong thing. And no one would even give him a real chance. He finished his meal in gloomy silence. Helen did not return. Leaving a dollar tip, Syl took to the street again.

By the end of the day he was firmly convinced that Packrat was an ideal location for a hardware store. The town had nothing of the sort at present. A general store kept a few necessary articles in the hardware line, but for any heavy equipment, the ranchers of the district had to travel to the larger town of Dryweather, forty miles distant. The surrounding range was prospering under improved beef prices. An infant business started here might soon grow to sizable proportions.

All of his plans were useless, however, as long as Packrat thought he was Wheez Gurney, the cold-nerved gun fiend. Even if he managed to get a store equipped, no one would come near it.

During the next two days Axlegrease Long was Syl's only companion. He frequented Long's cabin and talked with the old hostler until

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he had all but convinced him that he was not the infamous border killer.

At the Gravy Pot Syl tried repeatedly to explain his predicament to the blond girl, but he could not draw her into conversation. Seeming to feel that she had overstepped the limits that first time, she would hastily excuse herself and go to wait on someone else while Syl was trying to frame proper words.

It was early in the afternoon of Syl's third day in Packrat when Axlegrease Long came hobbling into his cabin to find the hardware man playing solitaire. Axlegrease was puffing like a locomotive, and his mustache was quivering with excitement.

"Gurney! It's happened," he sputtered. "I run all the way from the stable to tell you."

Alarmed, Syl dropped a red king. "What's happened? A revolution?"

"What I been expectin'—if you peddled straight lingo about bein' a Wyoming hardware man."

"You mean . . ." Syl hesitated, hope sparkling within him.

"Yessir," Long asserted. "Wheez Gurney hisself just pulled in from the border. He talks wheezier'n you do. And he looks like a gun wolf to boot. But I wouldn't have been sure of the cuss, only in takin' keer of his hoss, I noticed the word 'Gurney' burned into his saddle leather."

"Good," said Syl. "Soon as people get acquainted with the real Wheez Gurney, they'll savvy I ain't him. I can start up in business. I'll call it the Packrat Hardware Company. I'll use a slogan, *'Pack it away, you packrats.'*"

The hostler went back to his livery, and for the next few hours Syl busied himself forming plans for his business opening. The future looked rosy for the first time since he came to Packrat.

The sun was hovering low over the purple hills when Syl trudged up the street toward the Hogtrough. By now the word of Wheez Gurney's arrival must have spread through town. Now Syl could tell his story to the bartenders and rely on them to repeat it to all comers.

The Hogtrough was well filled, but a strange tension seemed to hold the crowd. Syl hesitated as eyes converged on him. A murmur rippled through the throng. Syl spotted the barkeeper thumbing in his direction and speaking out of the corner of his mouth to someone at the bar.

A gaunt, gray-faced man, his clothes dust-filmed and a snug fit about his gun belt and Colt-filled holster, detached himself from the liquor bottle in front of him and swung toward Syl. His face was flat and expressionless. Above the small scar on his Adam's apple, his jawbone had a ruthless bulge. Set narrowly, his eyes were like two thin chips of ice. He moved to within a yard of Syl and spoke in a voice that was hardly more than a rusty whisper, though it carried a deadly, penetrating ring that filled the room.

"They tell me you're askin' for a slug in the ticker, bud."

Syl blinked. A cold wave crawled

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down his spine. This was a reception he had not expected. "What you drivin' at?"

The gaunt man's hand crawled near his gun butt. "I hear you been palmin' your carcass off as Wheez Gurney. Havin' a hell of a time for yourself, treein' the town on my reputation. You ain't gettin' away with it no longer, hombre. I'm feelin' soft today, so I'm givin' you half an hour. If I ketch you around Packrat after the thirty minutes is up . . ." He reached out with his left forefinger and jabbed Syl squarely in the center of the chest, at the exact point where Axlegrease Long had pointed. "You can figure on soakin' up some lead—right there!"

Sweat began to ooze on Syl's forehead. No doubt that this was the real Whizz Gurney. And no doubt that the killer meant business.

"I'll think about it," Syl murmured, as he retreated through the batwings.

Syl Gurney tramped back down the dusty street with his chin low. His dreams were crashing about him. If he ran out of Packrat now, he could never come back. For the gun wolf's challenge would not be forgotten. Always Syl Gurney would be known as a yellow-livered coward. Further, there would be people who believed that he had deliberately tried to cash in on Wheez Gurney's reputation.

But if he didn't amble out of town, and fast, he would most certainly be carried out feet first. Syl was a reasonably good shot with a

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six-gun. But he was slow as iced molasses in getting his gun out. His only chance of surviving a powder-smoke party would be in Wheez Gurney missing the first three or four shots. And as Syl understood it, the border badman simply did not miss.

When Syl raised his eyes from his boot toes, he was beside the Gravy Pot. There was a face at the window, and Syl saw that it was Helen's. Her blue eyes met his. She smiled, and it was like a ray of spring sunshine.

He passed the building, but the smile lingered vividly in his mind, making things all the tougher. For if he rode away from Packrat, he would be riding away from Helen.

Syl continued to the abode of Axlegrease Long. The hostler was not there. Syl sat down on the cold cook stove and buried his chin in his hands. Gloom and frustration filled him like bitter smoke.

Meanwhile the thirty minutes were flitting away. He knew he should be getting his horse saddled. Still he hesitated.

The setting sun was spraying the town walls with crimson when Syl Gurney turned the corner onto Packrat's main street. The deadline had slipped past. But Syl did not turn toward the stable.

With mixed emotions, he began to march slowly toward the Hogtrough. As he passed the restaurant, he saw faces at the windows, Helen's among them. She was not smiling now. Her face was pale and drawn into tense lines. She looked as if she were trying hard to hold back tears.

Syl tore his gaze from her and resolutely forced his feet onward. For one rare moment he was being a hero. Although he didn't see Marshal Carse, everyone else in Packrat was on hand to watch the battle. Everywhere necks were craning from the town's coverts. The silence was so intense Syl could hear the fast thumping of his heart.

The Hogtrough batwings split, and Wheez Gurney appeared in the late sun's crimson glow. Like a machine, he moved down the street at a pace that was neither slow nor fast. Syl could see the cold, expressionless stare. This was an old game for Wheez Gurney. The gun wolf was unexcited, supremely confident.

Syl's hands began to tremble, and a great yearning for a fast horse and the open range filled his mind. He had to gulp every couple of steps to hold his stomach down where it belonged. It was mainly the thought of Helen that kept propelling him forward.

When only forty feet separated the Gurneys the border badman suddenly halted, his feet wide apart, a stiff stoop to his body. His wheezy whisper sounded loud in the street's hush.

"Near enough, hombre. You're a bigger lunkhead than I figgered. T'ain't often Wheez Gurney gives 'em a chance to get clear. You didn't have sense enough to take it. So it's your funeral. Make your draw—now!"

Syl gulped. Again he felt that wild impulse to travel fast and far. He was quivering all over now and he couldn't seem to steady his gun

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hand. He wondered if he could even hit the building behind Wheez Gurney. But it was too late to crawfish. He gritted his teeth and threw his right hand thighward.

There was a quick glitter of gun steel, then spitting red darts and a black fog of smoke. The street shuddered with the raw thunder of exploding powder.

Syl felt the shock of smashing bullets. They pounded his chest like invisible hammers. He jerked his six-gun free of leather, raised it and aimed through the billowing smoke screen. He aimed for Wheez Gurney's shirt front and fired. As the weapon bucked hard against his palm, he saw the outlaw freeze stiff as a lamp post. And then Gurney was crumpling into the street dust, his silent weapon sliding from his fingers.

The street was suddenly jammed with clamoring people. Syl Gurney looked about him in a dazed way. Men were running toward him, asking him if he was hurt.

"Hold on," Syl called out hastily. "Don't foller me, nobody! I got to be alone a second. Killin's always affect me this way."

He turned and slowly heeled it for Axlegrease Long's cabin. Safely inside the vacant shack, he ripped open his shirt and detached an iron stove-lid from the heavy cloth sling which had held it firmly against his chest. He replaced the lid on the cook stove and, drawing a deep breath, he let it roll out in a profound sigh of relief.

"Hardware is my line. Many uses for it," he murmured to himself. "Good thing Wheez Gurney wasn't lyin' about the way he shoots for the ticker. I was scared he wasn't such a good shot as they said. If he'd missed his target by six inches, I'd've been the unlucky cuss stretched out there in the dust."

When Syl reached the street again, the puzzled throng unloosed a thunderous roar. A cold, new alarm speared Syl. His own bullet had centered the gun wolf's chest. How would people know that he, after all, was not the real Wheez Gurney?

Two excited men sandwiched him, and he saw they were Axlegrease Long and Marshal Jack Carse.

"We proved it. You're no liar, Syl, me boy!" Axlegrease was crowing. "I argued the marshal into wirin' a border-town sheriff for Wheez Gurney's description. Wheez totes a scar on his Adam's apple. And your neck is smooth as a goose berry."

"That's right," Carse confirmed. "But I can't figger out how in thunder—slow as you got your gun out—you took the taw of that speed streak. And all you got out of the deal is a ripped shirt."

Syl grinned. "D'ruther not discuss gunplay, gents. But you can come along to the Gravy Pot and tell that scar story to Helen. I'm hopin' she'll be glad to hear it."

And she was. Her blue eyes told Syl Gurney just how glad.

THE END

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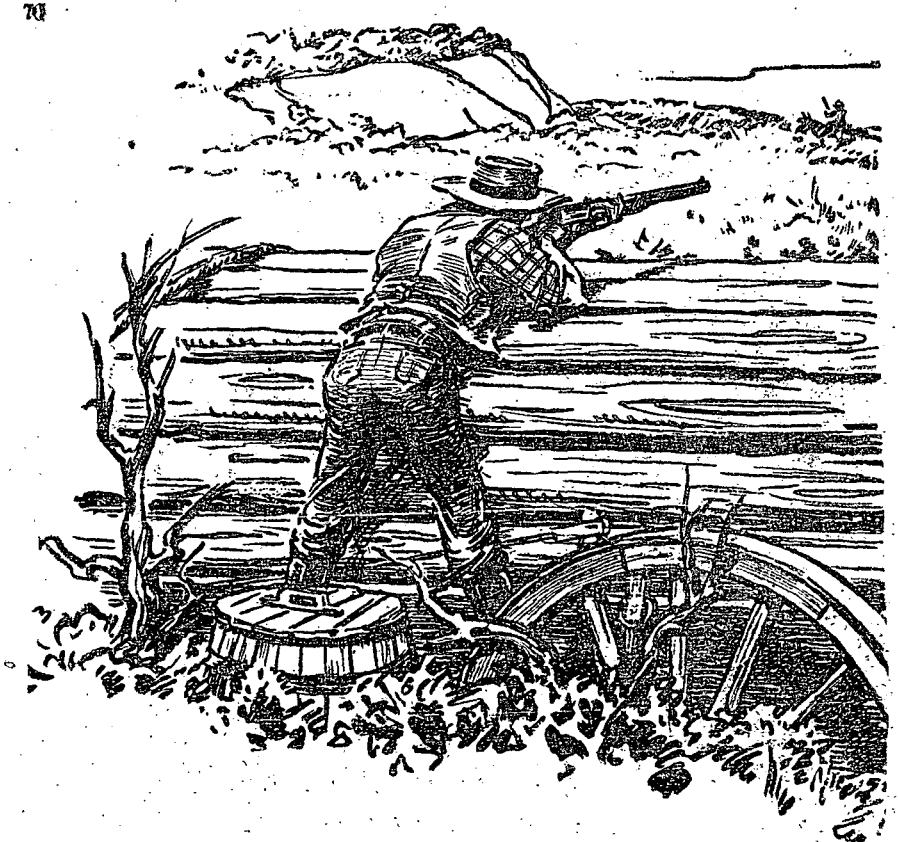

As a trouble-bucking team, Johnny the Reb and Luke the Yank were tops but could they tame Hense Dillard's hellions and win the right-of-way on that

SMOKY ROAD

I

THE trip west from Salt Lake had been long and hot, dusty and tiresome, and Luke Colhour, along with the other stage passengers, was almost comatose from the combined effects. The hard, brassy sun had gone down, which was some relief, and the desert, swimming in a shifting sea of blue and lavender shadow, held a vast, lonely beauty.

Came a lurch and the grind of brakes as the Concord abruptly slowed, rocking and creaking on its heavy leather thoroughbraces. The stage stopped completely and a blistering roll of curses sounded

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by L. P. HOLMES

from the driver's box. The passengers stirred to life.

"Injuns!" one of them mumbled fearfully. "Must be Injuns!"

Luke stuck his head out and called up to the whip. "What's the trouble?"

Came another roll of curses, then a growling explanation. "Flock of mule skinners havin' a fight. If they want to row, let 'em, and be hanged to 'em. But they got no right to block the road on me with one of their pole-hauling outfits."

"Swing out and cut around 'em," suggested Luke.

"Can't, right here. Sagebrush too thick on both sides of the road.

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Damn their stupid hides—with me already a half hour late into Bassett Wells! If you passengers want to eat tonight, you better get out there, take one side or the other and help break it up."

Luke relayed this suggestion to his fellow passengers and, receiving no support, stepped down from the Concord and went ahead alone.

About thirty yards ahead of the stage team was the heavy freight wagon, loaded with telegraph poles. Up at the head of this was where the ruckus was taking place. Luke heard curses, a yell or two and the smack and thud of blows given and taken. Here the road was narrow, with tangled sage, shoulder high, matted close on either side, and Luke had to push between the side of the pole wagon and the bank of brush to get a clearer view.

Even with the wheelers of the pole wagon team, the brush gave back in a tiny clearing. In this space two men stood, back to back, fighting off an attacking group of some half dozen. Even as Luke got his first clear glimpse of the ruckus, one of the two defenders got home a smashing blow which sent an attacker reeling back. On the heels of the blow lifted a thin, high, ululating yell of triumph and the tone and intensity of that yell ran through Luke like an electric shock, then immediately sent him smashing into the attacking group, both brawny fists swinging.

"Johnny!" he yelled. "Johnny Meredith! It's Luke—Luke the Yank. Stay with 'em—stay with 'em, Johnny Reb!"

Luke's part in the affair had the invaluable element of surprise, and he made the most of it. He got two clear shots at two surprised jaws and he didn't miss either of them. The attacking group broke, began to scatter. One of them caught up a club from the ground, aimed a wicked swing at Luke's head. Luke ducked aside and the club crashed down on the front wheel of the pole wagon, smashing to bits. Then Luke unloaded everything he had in a right hand to the club wielder's face, knocking the fellow cleanly back into the brush, where he went scrabbling away on all fours like some clumsy, wounded animal.

The rest of the attackers, all considerably the worse for wear by this time, followed suit, the brush crashing and waving as they fought and clawed through it to escape. In a moment the field was clear and Luke was gripping the hand of a lean, tall young fellow with clean-cut, hawkish features.

"Johnny Meredith!" Luke exclaimed. "Same old hell-roaring fighter as always. And that rebel yell of yours—I could pick it out of ten thousand. Don't look so bug-eyed. It's really me—Luke the Yank."

The tall, lean young fellow grabbed Luke, hugged him, beat his shoulder with an enthusiastic fist. "Damned if it ain't! Luke the Yank. Good old Luke! Man, you don't know what a help you were. Jase and me were doin' pretty good,

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but they had the numbers on us and would have got us, if you hadn't come along. Jase, shake hands with the best damn Yank that ever hit the Wilderness. . . ."

Jase was older, a slightly grizzled but brawny and powerful man. A smear of blood was seeping from his lips. "Fust time I can recall bein' glad of a Yank on the peck comin' my way," he grinned. "And I mean glad!"

"What was all the trouble about?" asked Luke.

Johnny shrugged. "Some of Dillard's men, I reckon. Dillard's trying to put a squeeze on the Desert & Northwestern Telegraph Co. for a higher rate on poles. Some of us little fellers in the game figger we're getting a fair price now, so Dillard is trying to keep us from making deliveries. That gang was some of Dillard's bully boys, out to persuade Jase and me the hard way. You must have got my letter, Luke."

"I got it, Johnny. And here I am, ready for anything you say, come hell or high water."

"You'll find plenty of hell but durn little water in this cussed desert," grinned Jase.

An impatient yell lifted, back on the stage. "When you going to get that blasted pole wagon out of the way? I ain't got all night."

"Brush opens out a couple of hundred yards along," said Johnny. "We'll pull out there and let the stage by."

"How far to Bassett Wells?" asked Luke.

"Three, four miles."

"Be waiting for you when you pull in, Johnny. Think you'll have any more trouble?"

"Not this day," answered Johnny with a chuckle. "They left here pretty damned discouraged. Look for us at the wagon camp, Luke. All right, Jase, let's be travelin'."

The pole wagon creaked away and as the stage drew up, Luke swung aboard, climbing to the box beside the driver. "The brush thins out up ahead. They'll pull out there and let you by," he told the driver. "That's my best friend, running that pole wagon. The man I came west to find."

" 'Pears you found him at a right handy time," grunted the driver. "What was the row about, anyway?"

"Seems to have been a move by a fellow named Dillard to discourage a little one-wagon pole-hauling outfit."

The driver spat. "That Hense Dillard, he's sure spreading his blanket over a heap of bedding ground. Heard of how he was trying to corral all the pole-hauling business and make the telegraph company pay through the nose. Yeah, plumb ambitious, Hense is. And he'll take a heap of whippin' before he gets back into the traces. Sure queer the way you bumped into that friend of yours. Which just goes to show that the world ain't always as big as it looks."

Having delivered himself of this piece of wisdom, along with a mouthful of blackstrap juice, the driver submerged himself in his habitual silence.

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II

They had met back on that wild, ferocious, bloody battlefield known in history as The Wilderness. There in those darkling, flame-shot woods where fighting men had died by the thousands. Here the battle line had ebbed and flowed, and Luke Colhour, a sergeant in the Union Military Telegraph, took a Minie ball in the arm and shoulder and lay wounded among men in blue and men in gray who would never fight another battle.

Someone held a canteen to his fevered lips. It was a lean, dark, hawk-faced young fellow in Confederate gray, who had a shattered leg. Around them the woods were on fire from thunderous artillery shelling. That was when and where Luke the Yank and Johnny the Reb had first met.

Johnny Meredith had two sound arms to bind up his own and Luke's wounds. And Luke, with Johnny hanging on his back, had two sound legs to carry both of them out of the acrid, choking smoke and flame of the burning woods, to the safety of the Confederate lines.

Ragged, hungry men in gray had cheered Luke when he came plodding in. They made much of the Yank who had brought back one of their own to safety, and Luke, though officially a prisoner for the duration, was moved to a Richmond hospital on the same hospital train with Johnny Meredith.

In that hospital they occupied beds side by side, received the same care, the same attention. And there they lay, mending back to health again while the thunderous finale of the war was being fought. And these two, the one of the Army of The Potomac, the other of the Army of Virginia, who had met as foes on the field of battle, ended the war as bosom friends, and with a number of fine young dreams half formed and beckoning.

They would, they pledged, keep in touch, and they had, Johnny from Virginia, Luke from Ohio. Then had come a lapse of months in which Luke heard no word from Johnny the Reb, and had begun to worry. Finally the long-awaited letter came, not from Virginia, but from the high, far desert country of the West, and Johnny wrote glowing words of great things to be done and of great opportunities waiting. Luke had taken just a week to close up his affairs and head into the sunset.

And here, in a different kind of wilderness they had met again. Staring musingly at the lights of Bassett Wells flickering out of the thickening darkness ahead, Luke Colhour wondered if the hidden hand of Destiny wasn't somewhere at work in the lives and affairs of himself and Johnny Meredith. . . .

Bassett Wells was a construction town, sprawling and uncouth out there in the desert night. It was noisy, blatant, seething with energy.

The stage pulled up beside a big corral. Luke got down, dug his frugal luggage out of the boot and looked around. The night air was strong with the hot, dry smell of dust, the acrid smoke of sagebrush

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roots, the smell of cooking food. Following the surly directions of a hostler, Luke circled the corrals away from the town proper to come to the wagon camp. Here reared the awkward shapes of heavy freight wagons, here were tents and a few scattered campfires.

Luke heard a woman sobbing, in a dry, hacking way that made the hair raise on the back of his neck. He heard another woman, speaking in a comforting way, her voice soft and melodious. Then he almost stumbled over the pair of them, for the gloom of night was growing thick and velvety.

"Sorry," Luke said and started to go on by, hesitated, turned. "It's none of my business, but if anyone is in trouble . . . if I could help . . .

The melodious voice answered him. "You might help us carry him, if you will."

"Him? Who . . ."

"Poor Cy Crosby. They . . . they beat him terribly."

Luke bent closer. A man lay there on the earth between the two crouched women. He was limp, inert.

"We were trying to carry him, but Mrs. Crosby isn't very strong," went on the melodious voice. "It's just a little way, now."

Luke put down his two grip sacks, swung the limp figure of the man up in his big arms. "Bring my grip sacks and lead the way," he said simply.

There was a tent, glowing faintly from a meagre light within. The woman who had been sobbing had quieted now. She held up the flap of the tent and said: "Put him right on the bed." Her voice was old, tired.

Luke laid his burden down. Not so much of a burden, at that. A man rather thin and wispy, with a seamed face and grizzled hair, now that Luke could see in the yellow light thrown down from the lantern swung to the ridge pole of the tent. There was blood on the man's face, and dirt, and several dark, swelling bruises. The man groaned and stirred.

"He's not dead," said the woman with the old, tired voice. "My Cy . . . he's not dead. . . ." Her voice broke a trifle.

"Shucks, no," said Luke heartily. "He's a long way from it, ma'am. He'll be all right."

The melodious voice said: "Thank you greatly, stranger. You're mighty kind."

Luke turned and looked at her. She was young and slimly graceful, with dark hair and big, dark eyes. She was pretty, in a fine, spirited sort of way.

Mrs. Crosby was already on her knees beside the bed, working with water and cloth at cleaning the blood from her man's face.

"Who was it mistreated the old fellow that way?" Luke asked the girl.

"A man, or rather"—and her dark eyes flashed—"a beast by the name of Kantrell. I was visiting with Mrs. Crosby when word came that this Kantrell bully had Mr. Crosby cornered over by the supply yards, and was beating him.

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By the time we got there, Kantrell had left, and poor Cy was lying there."

"You have an idea, perhaps, why this Kantrell hombre should have worked out on the old chap?"

The girl shrugged her slim shoulders. "Hense Dillard's orders, I suppose. Kantrell is one of Dillard's men. They've been threatening something of this sort, trying to make Cy and others like him stop hauling telegraph poles for the Company."

"So that's it!" murmured Luke. Here it was again, the same thing he had bumped into back along the road where Johnny Meredith and Jase had been having their troubles.

Luke paused at the tent entrance for one more question. "Maybe you know Johnny Meredith and could tell me where his camp is?"

The girl's head jerked up. "Johnny Meredith! Why, of course. Johnny is my brother."

"Your brother! Johnny . . . You're his . . . sister?"

She smiled at his surprise. "That's right. I'm Betsy Meredith. What is it you want with Johnny?"

"I'm to meet him at his camp. I'm Luke Colhour."

"Not Luke the Yank?"

"Luke the Yank it is. I didn't even know Johnny had a sister. And such a sister! Johnny's been holding out on me!"

III

They had finished eating their supper and were gathered about the campfire in front of the two tents which made up Johnny Meredith's camp. Johnny had just returned from visiting the Crosby tent and there were slumbering fires in his dark eyes.

"Cy Crosby is through," he announced. "That beating broke his nerve. Not that I blame him; Cy isn't a young man any longer. He wants to sell his wagon and team, wanted me to buy the outfit. I would, too, if I had the ready money."

"Is the outfit worth what he's asking for it?" Luke wanted to know.

"And then some."

"Fair enough. I'll buy it. But what will the old fellow and his wife do then?"

"Pick up a lighter outfit and head on to Oregon. He was planning on that from the first, as soon as he'd laid aside a little stake by hauling poles. Luke, you buy that outfit and we can really make some money, with you and Jase and me working together. The biggest job is cutting and loading the poles. After that it's just a case of slogging out the slow miles."

"And with three wagons," drawled Luke, "with each of us having an outfit to drive, we'd make still more money, eh?"

"Now you're getting into money away over my head," Johnny grinned.

"We'll see how much I got left after dealing with Cy Crosby. No time like now!"

"No time like now," echoed Johnny. "Jase, you stick around to sort of keep an eye on things."

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Jase nodded, but Betsy, who had been listening, said: "I'm not afraid to stay alone."

Johnny slid a fond arm across his sister's slim shoulders. "I know you're not, sis. But I'm afraid to have you stay alone, what with so many of Hense Dillard's pet thugs running loose. There's no telling what kind of deviltry Dillard will cook up next. Let's go, Luke."

The deal with Cy Crosby was soon completed and Luke, from a well-stuffed money belt, paid off in gold coin. Cy Crosby was back on his feet now and spoke clearly enough. But his hands shook and in his faded eyes was a great fear.

"Come morning, I'm rounding me up a light, fast-travelin' outfit and me and Marthy are gettin' out of this damn hell hole of a place," said the old fellow, through his puffed, discolored lips. "Was I younger, maybe it would be different. I'd probably git me a gun and hang up the skin of that feller Kantrell. Wish you boys luck."

Luke's blue eyes were gleaming as he and Johnny Meredith left the Crosby tent. "Don't know how you feel about it, Johnny," he said, a cold edge running through his tone, "but me, I sort of yearn to meet up with this Kantrell hombre. Besides, I got plenty left to maybe buy up that third haulin' outfit I was talking about. Up town might be a good place to find some feller ready to sell. Let's go find out."

Johnny laughed softly. "Same old Luke, eh? Come on."

There was nothing permanent about Bassett Wells. A few rough-boarded, hastily constructed buildings, a lot more of half wood and half canvas, and still more of canvas alone. The single street, or what passed as such, held a motley gathering of teamsters, skinners and other adventurous rough and ready souls.

"This telegraph line taps the main overland line at Gaspar and will run north into Idaho and then west into Oregon," Johnny explained. "Plenty of work ahead for everybody, providing Hense Dillard doesn't get his way and squeeze all us little fellers out."

"Way I feel right now," answered Luke succinctly, "that's going to take a heap of squeezing. Let's make the rounds and see what we see."

There were plenty of rough bars and gambling halls, all crowded, and Luke and Johnny spent a little time in each, looking around. They came to a big one, finally, in a building floored and walled with rough lumber, but roofed with a big canvas fly. Almost as they entered, Johnny caught Luke by the arm.

"Mister Hack Kantrell, in person," murmured Johnny. "Yonder, talking to that bean-pole mule skinner. Seems an argument is in the air, and that Mister Kantrell is winning it."

Hack Kantrell was a burly brute, with heavy shoulders and long, simianlike arms. His head was small and round, his features blunt and pushed together. He had the lanky mule skinner backed up against one end of the bar and was

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emphasizing his words by stabbing a heavy forefinger against the skinner's chest. Kantrell carried his bullet head thrust forward and his jaw stuck out. The skinner was squirming uneasily.

As Luke Colhour and Johnny Meredith moved closer they heard the skinner say, his voice thin and desperate: "I just can't let my outfit go at that price, Hack. It's worth at least two hundred dollars more than Dillard offered me. The outfit is all I got to my name and I can't afford to give it away. Still and all, I ain't a hog. Tell Dillard to come up a hundred and fifty and he can have the damned outfit."

"Dillard ain't coming up a damn cent more," growled Kantrell. "You'll take what he offered, Barker, or you'll end up minus both the outfit and your health." He doubled a fist suggestively.

The mule skinner, Barker, licked his lips. The look of a frantic, trapped animal was in his eyes. It was plain to see that he was ready to cave as Luke stepped forward and dropped his hand on the man's shoulder.

"I'm in the market for an outfit, friend," Luke said evenly. "If you're aiming to sell, deal me in. And I won't try and rob you, either."

The skinner gulped in fearful surprise. Hack Kantrell swung around, his lips pulling back. He had little, round, brutish eyes. "And who," he rasped, "in hell are you?"

Just a hint of a mirthless smile touched Luke's lips. "My best friend calls me Luke the Yank. And what's it to you?"

The skinner gulped again, sidled along the bar. Others in the near vicinity gave back, looking at Luke as though he were crazy.

"If he's got any pals around I'll keep 'em off your back, Luke—if I have to use a gun," Johnny said softly.

Hack Kantrell blinked, looked Luke over a little more closely. He saw a man as tall as himself, rugged and rawboned, with frosty blue eyes and hair as yellow as ripe wheat, showing beneath a tipped-back hat. But Hack Kantrell had plenty of confidence in himself.

"Well, Mister Luke the Yank," he sneered, "here's where you learn not to butt in my business."

Luke's mirthless grin widened a trifle. "Swell! And you'll learn it doesn't pay to beat up some poor old fellow like Cy Crosby."

Kantrell cursed and swung. Luke stepped inside the blow and knocked Kantrell flat with a short, crushing right to the jaw. The room was nearly as stunned as was Kantrell, at sight of this. It was the first time anyone there had ever seen the bully knocked off his feet.

Luke stepped back and waited for Kantrell to get up. But Kantrell did not get up, not all the way. Instead he lunged at Luke, low and hard, from a crouched position. He carried Luke's feet cleanly from under him and Luke went down hard. Kantrell dove at Luke, the fingers of his right hand spread and stabbing, aiming for his opponent's eyes.

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Luke managed to knock Kantrell's hand up just a trifle, so those stabbing fingers struck just a trifle high and they furrowed and skinned Luke's forehead, leaving burning pain in their wake, and the warm sliminess of seeping blood.

Kantrell cursed, smashed Luke on the side of the head with his left fist, grabbed at Luke's throat with his clawing right. Luke brought up his right knee, hard and driving, catching Kantrell in the crotch, flinging him clear over. By the time Kantrell scrambled erect and turned, Luke was back on his feet. Then Luke really went after Kantrell.

He dug a ripping left fist into Kantrell's body, brought his guard down, then hit him in the face with a right so slashing and heavy that Kantrell did not stop staggering back until his shoulders struck the opposite wall of the room. Luke was after him like a panther, giving him no chance to recover or get away from that wall. He nailed Kantrell to that wall, held him there, swinging one lethal punch after another, his feet spread, his knees slightly bent, so that he could bring his full weight and power into each blow.

Kantrell's head rocked and snapped, bumping the wall. The bully had never run into anything like this before. Kantrell liked to get hold of his man, so he could rip and tear and gouge. But he couldn't get past those leaden fists crashing into his face. He tried to crouch, so that he could dive at Luke's knees again, but Luke straightened him up with a ripping upper-cut that brought a gush of crimson from Kantrell's mouth.

No, Luke never let him get away from that wall, never let him get fully in balance again. He cut him down, certainly, remorselessly, and dropped him finally with a blasting right that nearly dislocated Kantrell's neck. The bully lay flat on his face along the base of the wall, twitching and retching.

Luke whirled to face the room, his blazing glance running over the awed crowd. "I'm looking for Mister Hense Dillard, the boss of that whelp. If he's present, let's see if he's man enough to step out and get some of the same. There's plenty of it left!"

Dillard, it seemed, was not present, nor was there anyone else who wanted to take up where Kantrell had left off. Johnny Meredith, his eyes shining, handed Luke his hat.

"I bet," said Johnny, "I bet Cy Crosby is resting easier, now. Come on, old Yank—you'll find no more argument here."

As they headed out, Barker, the bean-pole mule skinner, touched Luke on the arm. "That outfit is still for sale. I'd be proud to see it go to a guy like you."

"Come along," invited Luke. "If it's what I want, we'll make a dicker."

IV

The three pole wagons rolled slowly up out of the desert into the misty hills to the north, where grew the straight, slim, tapering conifer timber that was being cut for poles

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to carry the telegraph line. The road to the hills struck off from the main stage road some six miles east of Bassett Wells.

Johnny Meredith drove the lead wagon, and with him rode his slim, dark-eyed sister. Since it would take a couple of days to cut and trim and snake out enough poles for three wagon loads, it had been decided that in view of all that had happened, particularly the complete thrashing Luke Colhour had given to Hack Kantrell, the best place for Betsy Meredith was certainly not alone in Bassett Wells for a couple of days and nights.

They pitched camp beside a clear, cold mountain brook, selected their trees and set to work, the thud of their axes ringing across the mountain slope. Luke, aside from the skinned furrows across his forehead where Kantrell's gouging fingers had struck, bore no signs of the fight. Betsy had listened with big eyes to Johnny's description of the row and had then insisted on washing and doctoring Luke's forehead. Her fingers had been cool and deft and gentle. Luke was thinking of that now, as he swung his ax.

They felled, trimmed and peeled the bark from the trees. Snaking the yellowish-white poles down to the wagons, they loaded them, rolling them up skids. In the far distances they heard other axes ringing, where other men of their kind were toiling.

Betsy cooked for them, over the flickering camp-fire. And at night when, full fed and resting, they lounged at ease about the flames, Luke found himself more and more aware of the dark-eyed girl who sat across the fire from him.

The second night Johnny remarked, "We're not done with Hense Dillard, of course. From what I hear, he's not the kind to start anything he ain't pretty sure he can finish."

Johnny was right. The next morning while they were making everything secure, ready for the start back to Bassett Wells, it was Dillard himself who came riding up.

Luke was surprised, for it wasn't a big man sitting in that saddle. Hense Dillard was slightly under average height, a skinny man with bleached hair and eyebrows, a tight, thin mouth and eyes that told nothing at all. His clothes were worn, nondescript and his pants legs, scuffed up above his boot tops by the action of riding, advertised the fact that he wore no socks. A more colorless individual it was hard to imagine, yet the moment he spoke it was plain to see that here was a man who was hard and ruthless—and unafraid.

Dillard crossed his hands on his saddlehorn and looked down at them without blinking. His voice was thin and slightly nasal.

"I haven't really cut loose—yet. But I will if I have to. Yet there's times when fightin' a way through can be more expensive than buyin' a way. This looks more and more like that sort. So here's my offer for your three outfits, lock, stock and barrel." And he named it.

Figuring rapidly, Luke was further surprised to realize it was a

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fair offer. Nevertheless he shook his head. "Not interested, Dillard," he said curtly.

"It's a fair offer, and my last one," said Hense Dillard. "I'll even throw in a well-payin' job for the three of you. You particularly." He was looking at Luke. "You're the one who whipped Hack Kantrell. And any man who can whop Hack is worth money to me—big money."

"Still not interested," Luke answered. "You're wasting your time and ours, Dillard. That's final."

Hense Dillard pulled a plug of blackstrap from his coat pocket, selected a corner, gnawed it off. "More or less figgered that would be your answer," he said. "Too bad. You're a likely-looking lot. But you force my hand."

With that, he swung his horse and rode away, heading down and vanishing into the desert.

"I could snap his skinny neck with one hand," muttered Jase.

"Maybe," Luke said. "But make no mistake, folks, there goes a dangerous man. Alongside of him, Hack Kantrell is just a stupid clod. We got troubles ahead."

Johnny grinned. "And we're pretty good hands at taking care of trouble. I ain't worryin'. Him coming and trying to buy us out shows we got him worried. He offered a fair price, too."

"It also showed he means business," said Luke dryly. "I'm glad we had sense enough to bring rifles along. Going back, Johnny, your wagon will be the middle one. Jase, you keep an eye on things from the rear. And, Johnny, if anything breaks, you get Betsy off that wagon and get her off quick!"

The wagons rolled down out of the foothills and into the desert. They rolled slowly, for those green poles were heavy and the teams had to lean into the pull every step of the way. In the desert it was dusty and hot and the slow miles slid back, one by one.

They stopped briefly at midday in the dusty, pungent sage. From the water barrels on the front of the wagons they dipped buckets of water for the thirsty mules and poured a measure of oats into feed bags. There was a frugal lunch for themselves. Then it was back to the grind of miles once more through the blistering afternoon.

Every now and then, as the dust drifted clear, Luke looked long and searchingly in all directions and saw nothing except a number of drifting dust clouds where other wagons were rolling. Sundown came and smoky blue shadows began to flow. Then, abrupt as a thunderclap out of a clear sky, back where Jase's outfit rolled, sounded a burst of gunfire. Sounded also Jase's yell of warning, a yell which broke off with ominous suddenness.

Luke Colhour set the brake of his wagon, jerked his rifle from the scabbard and was off the wagon all in one swift drive of movement. Then he was running back to the second outfit. The Merediths were both down off their load, and Johnny was ready to head back to

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Jase's aid, but Luke stopped him.

"I'm going back, Johnny. You stay here. You got Betsy to watch out for as well as your wagon and mine. Drive from the ground and get your wagon right up close to mine. That way you can guard them better."

Betsy Meredith dropped a slim hand on Luke's arm. Her voice was steady, soft. "Watch yourself, Luke . . . please!"

In an alert crouch, Luke raced back for the rear outfit.

To avoid the worst of the dust from the two leading wagons, Jase had held back until his wagon was nearly two hundred yards behind. The attack had been smartly planned, striking at the rear this way, instead of at the front, as might reasonably be expected, for those two heavily loaded wagons up front couldn't run away.

"Jase!" called Luke. "Jase!"

Jase did not answer and Luke almost fell over him, lying there beside the near front wheel of the wagon. Jase's hat was off and there was blood matting his hair. With a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach, Luke dropped on his knees and turned Jase over. Jase moaned slightly and Luke let out a gasp of relief. There was a savage, raw slash along the side of the wounded man's head, but he wasn't dead. Luke knew what he had to do.

He caught up Jase's rifle and levered a couple of quick shots into the shadowy mockery of the sage, which would give the attackers something to guess about. Then, swinging Jase's limp figure over his shoulder, he started back for Johnny's wagon.

The sagebrush, almost head high here, was a help as well as a hindrance. For, while it might provide cover for the attackers, it also gave Luke a chance to maneuver in comparative safety.

"Jase!" exclaimed Johnny, as Luke came panting up. "They . . . got him?"

"Creased him. He was alive when I started back with him. Betsy—your chore!"

Luke laid Jase down, turned and raced back. He was almost there when, off to his right, a rifle snarled, a bullet told with a fleshy "thock" and one of the swing mules collapsed in its tracks. The rest of the team began to rear and double back in fright, crashing and tangling in the brush. Again that rifle snarled and another mule went down. Cold fury burned in Luke. So that was the scheme, eh? Men first, then the mules, and after that, no doubt, fire for the wagons . . .

Rifle in hand, Luke went up on to the load. It was the only way he could get high enough to look out across the dusk-washed sage. He would be a target, up there, but also, he might find a target. He lay low against the poles, peering out at where those two rifle shots had come from. And he saw the shooter, just as rifle flame lanced again and another of the frantic mules went down.

The shooter was mounted and not fifty yards away and even as Luke thrust his rifle across the top log,

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he saw, from the corner of his eye, several other riders moving up toward the front wagons, paralleling the road. They could wait. First, this hombre . . .

In the dusk the sights blurred somewhat, but Luke held low, right where the fellow's body joined his saddle. Luke's rifle spat, slapping his shoulder in recoil. Luke saw the rider lurch, then he was gone, and a riderless horse was racing off through the sage.

"That's for Jase, damn you!" muttered Luke, swinging the lever of his rifle and looking for another target. Those moving up on the lead wagons were much farther away, less certain targets. But Luke tried for one, holding plenty low. He saw the fellow's horse rear, then disappear in the sage.

From atop Johnny's wagon a rifle lanced thin flame and a third rider went out of his saddle. Johnny Meredith's rebel yell lifted, wild and thin and pealing. Rifle fire came snarling back, but it wasn't the same, now. For the moment the shoe was on the other foot. Up in their saddles the riders were more open targets than the men they sought. And if they dismounted, while the sage might hide them, it also hid their targets. So they raced away into the warm mists and disappeared.

There had been seven or eight to begin with. Two were down for sure, a third minus his horse. Would they come back? Or had they run into more than they bargained for and finally decided they wanted no more of the affair?

It seemed like the latter, for dusk became darkness with no further sign of attack. Luke prowled back up to the lead wagons, calling softly: "Johnny!"

"Yeah, Luke. Everything's quiet here. They wasted a lot of lead at you back there, eh?"

"They killed three of the mules, which anchors that wagon. Jase . . . how is he?"

"Still out, but Betsy thinks he has a good chance if we can get him to town and take care of him right. What you figger we should do—stay here, or try and get two wagons through?"

Betsy spoke, her voice soft and cool and steady. "We'll take all three wagons. I can drive one."

"With three mules down, we can't bring the third wagon in, sis," objected Johnny.

"We can if we unload it," Betsy said.

"Good girl!" Luke exclaimed. "As simple as that, and Johnny and me too stupid to think of it. You're right. We can always get more poles, but wagons are scarce and cost money. We'll try it, Johnny. Leave your rifle with Betsy. And, Bet, if you hear the slightest sound or see the slightest move that don't seem right, fire a shot into the air. Johnny and me'll be right with you. Come on, Johnny—we got work to do."

They straightened the remaining mule out first, cutting the dead ones out of the harness, balancing the remainder up as a team of four, with the odd one to lead behind. They

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pulled the side stakes of the wagon, rolled the poles off. Then they drove up to where the other wagons waited in the dark. Jase was placed on a mat of blankets in the empty wagon. Then, with Johnny up front, Luke in the rear and Betsy handling the jerk rein of the middle wagon, they went on. Johnny and Luke carried their rifles across their knees, ready for any emergency, eyes and ears straining at the velvet dark.

They struck the main stage road, turned into it, and rolled out the last miles into Bassett Wells without further trouble.

V.

It was late by the time they had rounded up a doctor to care for Jase's wounded head. The doctor washed and sterilized, stitched and bandaged.

"He's going to be a plenty sick man for a time," said the doctor. "There's concussion there. But with absolute rest, he should make the grade. I'll be around tomorrow to have another look."

They ate a late, and silent, supper. Then Johnny looked at Luke. "Well, old Yank—where from here? I can tell you've been doing a lot of thinking. What's the answer?"

"First," Luke answered slowly, "I want to see the Company man in charge of the supply yards. You know him?"

Johnny nodded. "Hassinger is his name—Bill Hassinger. Come on, he works late. Sis, you keep a gun handy. And if anyone comes skulking, shoot first—and shoot straight."

"There's no danger, here in the wagon yards," said Betsy quietly. "But you two . . . the last time you went prowling together you got in trouble. Just remember you can't fight everybody's fight."

Bill Hassinger was a harried, overworked man in a little cubby of a building that was both his office and living quarters. He listened to the story Luke told him, then threw up his hands.

"I know—I know. That damned Hense Dillard! I've tried to get action on him from headquarters at Granite City half a dozen times, telling them of the hell he was raising at this end of things. But it seems they got plenty of troubles, too. The Injuns are giving them a bad time, what with cutting down poles, shooting off insulators and dragging down the wire here and there and cutting chunks out of it. I know what you little operators are up against with Dillard and I know that without you we'd run out of poles in a hurry. You're entitled to Company help in this mess, but right now . . ." He shrugged helplessly.

They left Hassinger to his multitude of troubles and headed up town.

"Just two things we can do, Johnny," Luke said. "We can go along as we have been doing, letting Dillard call his shots at us, like this evening. And we can't figure on the same brand of luck, next time. That attack was handled very badly, else they'd have wiped us out.

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Yeah, we can go on letting Dillard call the shots—or we can call a shot or two ourselves, move in on Dillard and shove the whole issue right down his throat and choke him with it. The lid is off and anything goes. Dillard wrote the rules, so he can't kick if we play them, too. What say?"

Johnny stretched his arms. "Nothing could be as tough as the Wilderness was, Luke. We whipped that together. Lead on!"

"We could probably round up a following among the little outfits," said Luke. "But they might get in the way. Where does Dillard hang out?"

"In back of the Chancellor, so I've heard. Also, I've heard he owns the Chancellor and a lot of other dives about town. Has his finger in plenty of pies, Hense Dillard has."

"That's what the stage driver told me, only in different words." Luke nodded. "We'll see."

They looked in at the Chancellor, where every gambling table was going full blast, even at this late hour. There was a back room to the place and even as Luke and Johnny watched, they saw a couple of men with spurred boots and belted guns come out of there and line up at the bar. They looked surly, angry.

"He expects a hell of a lot, for a few lousy dollars," one of them growled to the other. "What did Hicky and Kantrell get but a rifle slug through their guts, and Jim Peavy a smashed leg, trying to do his dirty work. These little pole-hauling outfits ain't all damn fools, or yellow, either. And they can shoot too damned straight to suit me. Yeah, *he* should give us hell for botching that job this evening!"

Luke touched Johnny on the arm and drifted out into the night. "Around back," murmured Luke. "Mister Hense Dillard is finding out you can hire only so much for money."

The Chancellor was housed in one of the few all-wood buildings in the town of Bassett Wells. There was a window glowing yellow beside the outside door of the back room.

With the outer dark as a shield, Luke and Johnny looked in. Hense Dillard sat at a table, bottle and glass at his elbow. His mouth was pulled tight and venomous, his blank eyes staring at nothing. There was a bunk along the far end of the little room and another man lounged there, smoking.

Dillard swung his head, said something to the man on the bunk, who got up, came to the door, opened it and stepped out into the night. He went down in a heap under the slashing impact of the barrel of Luke's heavy Colt revolver. Luke stepped right past him and his voice rang harshly: "Stay put, Dillard!"

Hense Dillard stared at Luke and at Johnny Meredith with those blank eyes of his. His expression never changed. The man had nerve, all right—plenty of it. He shrugged.

"If men like you two were for hire, I could have run this neck of the woods to suit myself," he said.

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"But those other damn fools like Hack Kantrell and Hicky and Peavy and the rest . . . Ah, well, that's the way it goes. Sometimes you draw cards and sometimes you don't."

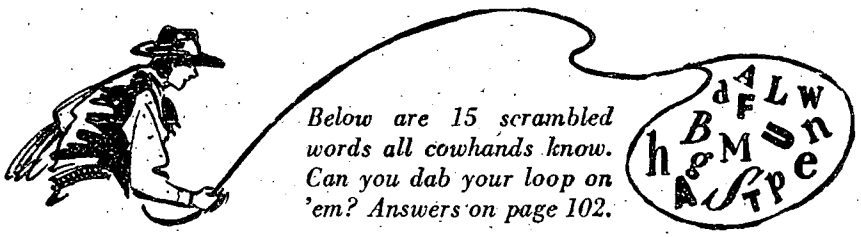
He had both hands against the edge of the table as he spoke. Now, snake fast, he upended the table with one savage heave. He had a gun out and flaming even as the table and lamp it held crashed to the floor. But he was dying as he shot, for slugs from Luke's and Johnny's gun crossed in him, chest high. Yet he came close, for Luke's left arm was flung back as Dillard's slug ripped along it from wrist to elbow. Then the room gushed into flame as the spattered oil from the smashed lamp caught and flared and tinder-dry floor and walls seemed to suck in the flame. . . .

Betsy Meredith cried a little as she tended Luke's wounded arm. "First Jase, now . . . now you. If this is the price to be paid for making a few dollars hauling telegraph poles, I want no more of it. N-next time it will probably be J-Johnny. . . ."

"No," said Luke gravely. "There'll be no more trouble, Betsy. Our troubles went up in smoke, along with the Chancellor. Dillard wrote the rules and in the end, he had to abide by them. We'll go on hauling poles. We'll follow the line into Idaho, into Oregon. And when I get to Oregon, I want you with me. A good land to be together in, Betsy—Oregon."

Betsy had finished with the bandage and now she gave it a gentle pat. "I've heard so, Luke," she admitted softly. "I've heard so."

THE END



Below are 15 scrambled words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 102.

1. vyvas
2. crupes
3. rife
4. tega
5. krece
6. yellav
7. wodema
8. redal
9. verily
10. laropp
11. rutto
12. cubk
13. ages
14. wardkalob
15. mocknats

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CIMARRON

by S. Omar Barker

Of western rivers fame has known,
Hardiest is the Cimarrón.
Along its course from mouth to head
Horseback men have fought and bled.
Kit Carson and his mountain men
Knew it in the rough days when,
Against Apache red and Ute,
Pioneering first took root.

From hoarded snow amid tall peaks
Gush a dozen clear, cold creeks,
Quick to rush past cliffs of stone
Down to form the Cimarrón.
Down and down through dwindling hills
Out across the plains it spills,
By its deep-washed gullies tanned,
Water for a thirsty land.

Through its mighty canyons passed
Wagon trains that came at last
To a new-found western loam
Fitted for a landman's home.
Up the long trails to its bank
Came the longhorns, lean of shank,
Driven by a horseback breed
Born of rawhide Texas seed.

Friendly with its waters low,
Still old-timers live who know
How young cowboys dared and died
Swimming the herd at its flood tide.
Men were rawhide to the bone
On the old-time Cimarrón:
Trapper, cowboy, long-haired scout—
Men whose code was "Fight it out!"

Cimarrón! The river born
Out of rawhide, hoof and horn!

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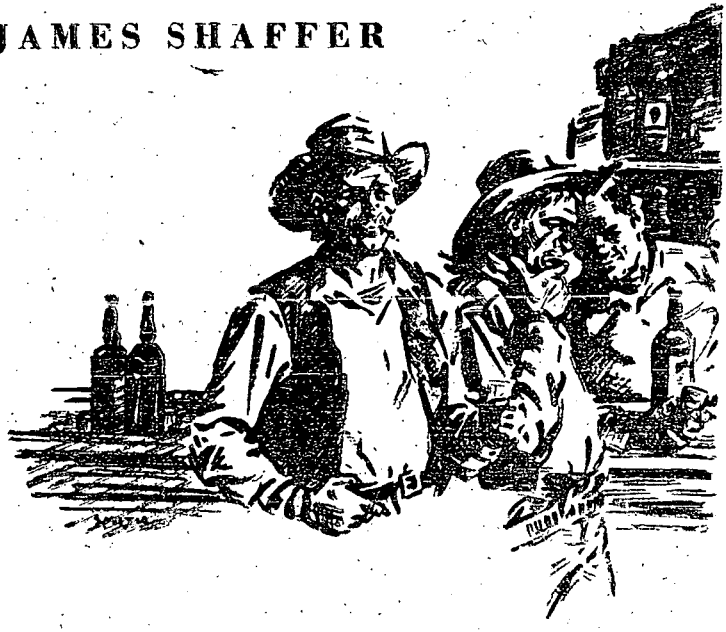
HOT-LEAD HAVOC

by JAMES SHAFFER



I

OLD PENDLETON ADAMS looked across the kitchen table at Jim Walton. There was something on Jim's mind, Pen thought, something that the young rancher wanted to talk about, and couldn't screw up his courage to mention.

Pen reached for another biscuit, grinning through the rheumatic pain it caused him.

"Almost picked up two," he grinned over at Elsie Walton; "they're so light and fluffy."

"You're just an old flatterer," she said lightly, but Pen detected a note of forced gaiety in her voice.

He wondered what had happened in Jimpson Valley during the month he'd been away delivering a herd of Tate Buskin's cattle. Something was hanging over the whole Walton family, like a black cloud. Even Jimmy, the seven-year-old image of his father, was unusually quiet and reserved.

It worried Pen, because he considered Jim Walton and his family his

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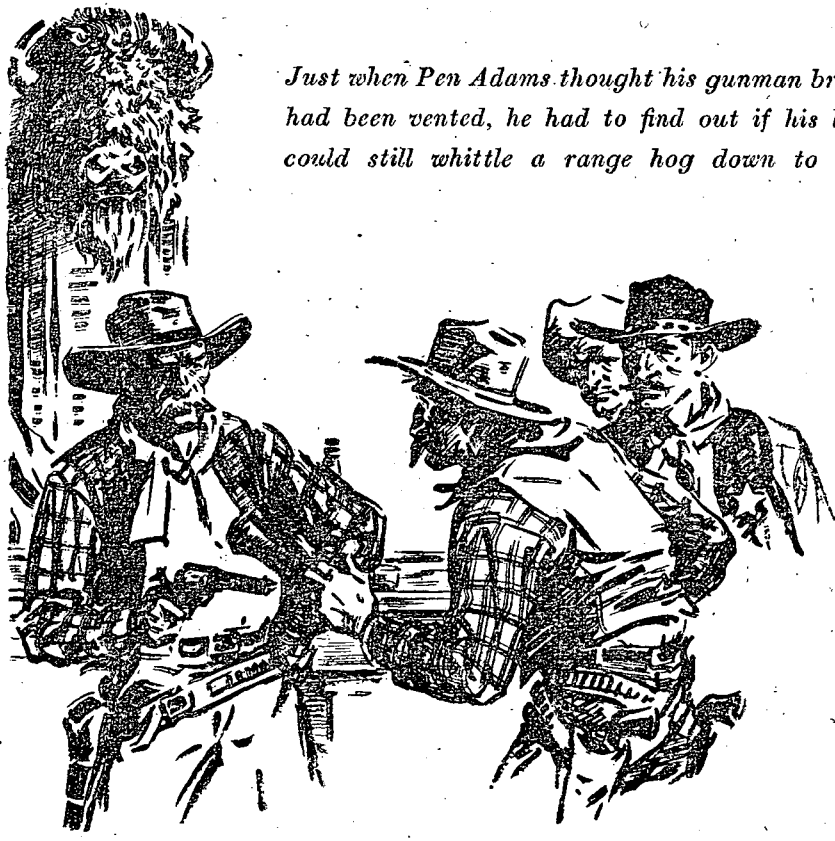

Just when Pen Adams thought his gunman brand had been vented, he had to find out if his lead could still whittle a range hog down to size

best friends in the Valley. Friends. He rolled the word around in his mind. There'd been a time in old Pen's life when he didn't know what a friend was.

Pen finished his meal, then groaned with rheumatic pain as he got to his feet. "Reckon I'd better be getting along," he said, then grinned at Elsie. "Just couldn't ride by near meal time, though, and not stop for some of them biscuits."

Jim Walton's had been Pen's first stop after hitting the Valley, and he'd slyly timed his arrival at supper time.

"Reckon you're toting quite a wad of money for Tate Buskin," Jim Walton said a little hesitantly.

"Yep," Pen said, feeling the wad of money he'd gotten for the sale of Tate's cattle. "Tate's got a good-paying ranch now, that's free of debt. This money'll put him on easy street."

"If he's just got sense enough to realize it," Jim muttered.

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"Huh?" Pen was surprised at the bitterness of Jim's tone, and again he wondered what had happened during his absence. "Tate's got good sense, I reckon," he added slowly.

"He sure owes you plenty," Jim blurted out. "Before he hired you, the Claggs and Yergens had him over a barrel. Reckon about everything he's got, Tate owes to you."

The Claggs and the Yergens. Pen's gnarled hands brushed the butts of the two Colts riding his lean old hips. Deadly guns—once. Now just ornaments belted on a rheumatic old man. Yes, the Claggs and Yergens had been tough.

"I been paid, Jim," he said slowly. "I been paid well."

He hoisted himself into the saddle and rode off. Yes, he'd been paid since he'd been in Jimpson Valley. Not just with money. Money didn't count so much. But with respect and friendship. A lot of folks wouldn't understand that, Pen thought. Even Tate Buskin might have trouble understanding it. Tate had never been a real neighborly man. But Pen understood it—because there'd been times when he'd had neither respect nor friends.

But he had 'em now, he thought with a warm glow. He remembered Elsie Walton's tender care the time he'd stopped a Clagg bullet. He remembered other acts of friendship, by other ranchers and neighbors in the Valley, and his hands brushed the worn Colts again. Rheumatism might have made his draw a slow, pitiful thing, but once the guns were out, the accuracy was still in his hands and eyes. If any of his friends were in trouble . . .

It was almost dark when he rode up to the Leaning B ranchhouse. Tate Buskin must have been listening for him, for at the sound of Pen's horse, the door of the ranchhouse opened, and Tate came out on the porch. He was a square, blocky-built man, with thin lips and suspicious gray eyes.

"Where you been?" he demanded irritably. "Expected you in early this afternoon. Where's the money?"

Pen grunted, and did not trouble to explain that he'd stopped at the Waltons' for a meal. Tate wasn't too neighborly, although he'd never objected to Pen's visiting the folks nearby.

"What you worried about?" Pen asked as he mounted the steps. "The money's safe. The Claggs and Yergens have left the country for good, and with them gone, there's no need to worry about being held up." He led the way into the cluttered-up room Tate used as an office, unbuckling the money belt. As he did so, a man stepped into the room, and Pen's old eyes narrowed speculatively.

This gent was young, and while he wore range clothes, there was a certain gaudy, flashy cut about them. And his guns—Pen glanced at them, then shifted his glance to the man's hands. The guns were low-slung and the holsters low-cut. And their wearer's hands were not calloused like a regular cowhand's.

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Pen was remembering that he must have looked like that himself—years ago.

Tate peeled off some bills and handed them to the newcomer. "Here's your pay, Joe. Get the broncs ready while I put this money in the safe. Then we're ready to ride."

"Okay," Joe said and went out. His voice was soft, but there was a chill in it.

"Going somewheres tonight?" Pen asked Tate.

Tate nodded briskly. "Going to hire some more men."

Old Pen frowned. "We don't need more men, Tate. Fact is, I don't see why you hired that—that gun-slinger."

Tate turned around quickly. "That's Joe Metaxa, and he don't like to be called a gun-slinger."

Pen smiled bitterly, remembering the days of his youth. "They never do," he said softly. "But why'd you hire him?"

"Had a little trouble while you was gone," Tate explained peevishly. "So I put Joe on the pay roll."

"Not with Jim Walton . . . the trouble, I mean?" Pen asked quickly.

Tate laughed. "Hell, no—not with Walton. He's a sensible young fellow." He picked up his hat. "Gotta be going. We're late now," he muttered and hurried out.

Pen followed him out, and watched him and Joe Metaxa—the man who didn't like to be called a gun-slinger—ride off. He was thoughtful as he unsaddled his horse and walked over to the empty bunkhouse. He pulled his clothes off and sighed gratefully as he slid between the blankets.

But dog-tired though his rheumatic old bones were, sleep would not come. His mind kept rolling back the span of years. He saw himself as he had seen Joe Metaxa; young, cocky and with a pair of fast, deadly sixes. He'd been that way once; he'd been that way, until Fate had dealt him a lucky break.

That was when Tate Buskin had hired him. But at the time, it had seemed just like any other job. A gun job.

"I wanta hire your guns," Tate had said. "I got a ranch that borders on the mountains, and there're two families up there that're robbing me blind. They're half outlaw, and they can kill a man 'thought batting an eye."

Pen had nodded. He'd been younger then. Now rheumatism had cramped his arms in a vise of pain.

"The sheriff has tried to stop 'em," Buskin had gone on, "but he ain't been able to do it. My only chance to keep going is to hire a fast gun hand who'll go after my cattle and get 'em, even if he has to kill a few Claggs and Yergens. I'll pay regular gun-hand wages with ca'tridges thrown in."

Pen had taken the job, and for the first six months or so, he'd kept pretty much to himself in Jimpson Valley. He'd figured that the folks around were going to treat him as other folks had treated him—as the hired gun-slinger that he was.

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But it hadn't worked out that way. The Claggs and Yergens were a wild, tough bunch, and the folks of Jimpson Valley had figured that anybody taming them was doing the country a favor. And they treated Pen like a neighbor.

It had done something to Pen. In all his years as a tough hand, no one had actually extended the hand of friendship to him—and here these folks were taking him in as one of themselves. He remembered the night he'd almost bawled, coming home from the Robinson barbecue. He was glad it was dark, and that he'd been alone. But it made up his mind for him.

When the fighting part of the job was over, Pen had stayed on with Tate. The Claggs and Yergens had pulled out, leaving a number of their clan in a mountain graveyard. But Pen had stayed. He took a cut in pay to a regular cowhand's wages, and stayed with Tate. It wasn't because of any loyalty to Tate, but because he had friends in Jimpson Valley. It was home to Pen Adams.

And now Tate Buskin was hiring another gun-slinger. Why? Were the Claggs or the Yergens back?

But no. Jim Walton would have told him, had that been the case. No . . . . whatever it was, it was something that Jim Walton wanted Pen to find out for himself. . . .

II

He slept late the next morning, and awoke to the sound of horses' hoofs. Rolling out of his bunk, he was in time to see Tate Buskin and Joe Metaxa ride away from the ranch. He got his own breakfast, then saddled his mount. He decided that since Tate hadn't left him any orders, he would ride to Ligeville and nose around into the trouble.

But a few miles from the Leaning B, Pen reined up suddenly at the sight of a moving cloud of dust. The dust was kicked up by a good-sized bunch of cattle. They were being hazed from the Leaning B range toward Pete Graham's G-in-a-Box spread. Pen swung his horse that way.

While he was still a good distance away, a man rode out of the dust cloud; a man who had his gun half drawn. The man studied Pen for a moment, then slid his gun back in the holster. It was Joe Metaxa.

"Hiya, gran'pa," he said as Pen rod up. He was half-grinning, half-sneering at Pen.

Pen flushed at the word, then swung his horse close to the gunman. "Reckon you ain't learnt the lay of the land 'round here," Pen said easily. "You're hazing them critters onto another fellow's range."

"I know the lay of the land, all right," Metaxa snapped coldly. "Spent the first week I was here riding around looking it over."

"Then I reckon you know you're driving them cows onto Pete Graham's spread," Pen said sharply. "Better turn 'em around."

Metaxa grinned and rolled a smoke. He had a long narrow face that reminded Pen of a weasel, and he grinned with just his thin, tight

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lips. His eyes kept their cold, calculating look, grin or no grin.

"I'm doing this," he said, touching a match to his smoke.

"Sure you're doing it," Pen agreed. "So I'm telling you to—turn 'em around!"

"Go to hell!"

Pen slugged him then. It wasn't much of a blow, but the way Pen did it—lunging his horse forward and slugging Metaxa alongside the head—knocked the gunny half out of the saddle.

"Now I know who's starting the trouble 'round here," Pen ground out.

"Damn you—" Metaxa snarled and started for his gun. Pen lunged his horse again, slammed solidly into Metaxa's mount. The gunman grabbed the saddlehorn to keep his seat. Pen dragged a Colt out—he saw the other clawing for his weapon—then slammed the barrel alongside Metaxa's head.

The gunman hit the ground a-sprawl, his gun thudding into the dust. With a snarl, Metaxa leaped for the gun, and Pen put a slug within an inch of his outstretched fingers.

"The next slug'll take your trigger finger off," Pen said slowly. "Now leave that cutter alone and haze them critters back where they belong."

Metaxa's face was a mask of fury as he climbed into the saddle and rode off. Pen watched until the fuming Metaxa had the cattle headed back for their home range, then rode back to the ranch. It was late afternoon before Tate Buskin returned to the ranch, and Pen legged it over to the corral as soon as the rancher had hauled to a stop. As he neared Tate, he spied Joe Metaxa riding in from the range.

"That snake coming yonder is causing you trouble, Tate," Pen stated. "This morning I found 'im shoving some of our stock onto Pete Graham's range."

Tate Buskin whirled quickly. "What'd you do?" he snapped.

"What'dya think?" Pen retorted. "Made 'im drive 'em back. You better fire that gun-slinger before he causes you some trouble—"

"Mind your own business after this!" Tate yelled, and had no time to say more, for Metaxa had arrived at a gallop. The gunman leaped from his horse and ran toward Pen.

"I'm gonna break your damn neck!" he snarled. Pen dropped his hand to his gun butt. "Oh, it's guns, is it?" Metaxa yelled. "That's okay. . . ."

"Stop it, Joe!" Tate Buskin ordered and slapped his hand over Metaxa's wrist.

"This damn old fool tried to—" the gunman fumed.

"I know," Tate snapped. "Go on to the bunkhouse. I won't have you two fighting." He turned to Pen. "Hereafter, don't interfere with none of the hands, Pen—they're acting under my orders."

Pen's jaw dropped, and for a long moment, he stared at his boss, hating to believe what he had just heard.

"So you were deliberately driving

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stuff onto Pete Graham's range?" he asked finally.

"Pete Graham owes me money," Tate said, and there was a harsh, raspy quality in his voice. "Since he won't pay up . . ." He left the sentence unfinished and shrugged his shoulders.

"There was a time when you couldn't pay *your* debts, Tate," Pen reminded pointedly. "But nobody took your range."

Tate smiled, a sly, cunning smile. "Sure nobody tried to take it. That's what I had you for."

Pen felt the hot blood rush to his face. Then he shook his head doggedly. "Nobody tried to take it," he argued, "except the Claggs and Yergens—and they picked on you 'cause you were the handiest. But the rest of the ranchers"—he shook his head—"they helped us out."

"You been with me eight years," Tate said flatly. "Eight years when there was times I didn't know where my next meal was coming from." His eyes narrowed. "Well, that's over. I aim to get rich enough not ever to have to worry again—and strong enough not to have to worry about rustlers and the like."

Pen watched Tate walk toward the house, hoping it was all a bad dream, and that he'd wake up pretty soon. But he knew it was no dream, and after a while he saddled up and rode over to Jim Walton's.

The young rancher heard him ride up, and came down to the corral to meet him. Pen noticed with a start that Jim was wearing his six-gun. At once the happy years in Jimpson Valley rolled away, and old Pen was once more back in the life he'd known, when his six-guns had been more than ornaments.

"I knew something was troubling you last night," Pen said. "Now I know what it was."

He saw the embarrassed look on Jim's face, as the younger man tried to hitch the gun around out of sight. Jim rolled a smoke with nervous fingers.

"I figure Tate'll come to his senses," he said awkwardly.

Pen nodded thoughtfully. He knew that a lot of the ranchers owed Tate Buskin money. He wondered if Jim Walton did—and how much. But his reply was casual.

"Ain't had a chance to have a good talk with Tate, yet," he said. "But I aim to. I figure he'll drop the whole idea. I'd ride over to Graham's tonight, but"—he eyed the gun on Jim's waist—"Graham would be wearing one, too, so maybe I'd better not. If you should see him, though, tell him I think the whole thing'll blow over in a coupla days."

"I'll tell him," Jim said slowly, "but Pete's pretty riled up about this thing. So's everybody else," he added.

Pen didn't return to the Leaning B that night, but spent the night in one of the ranch's line shacks. He didn't want to sleep in the same bunkhouse with Joe Metaxa. One of them might be dead the next morning.

It was just past noon when he got back to the ranch. Three sweating horses were ground-hitched at

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the corral. Pen recognized the one ridden by Joe Metaxa. He hurried to the ranchhouse.

Tate Buskin was talking to Metaxa and two other men, and the sight of the other pair turned Pen's stomach cold. They had the same brand on them as Joe Metaxa. Metaxa glared at Pen as he came in, but a warning look from Tate Buskin stopped the young gunman.

Tate Buskin was talking. "Graham's got three cowhands," he said. "They'll be riding today. Git back in your saddles and see that they don't do us no harm. And," he added harshly, "you might be able to arrange it so's those three would figure it would be safer to quit working for Pete Graham."

Joe Metaxa laughed. "Them orders are clear enough to me. C'mon, boys."

"So you've started it in dead earnest," Pen said softly, when the three had gone.

"*I* didn't start it," Tate growled. "Graham started it—this morning. Took a shot at Metaxa."

"Don't blame 'im," Pen said shortly.

Tate Buskin looked at Pen. "Metaxa shot Graham."

"Dead?"

"Dunno," Tate answered callously. "Joe don't think so."

Pen felt all hollow inside. He walked slowly down to the bunkhouse and dropped on the edge of his bunk. For a long time he sat there, trying not to believe what had happened, and sick at the knowledge that it had happened.

He remembered the time Pete Graham had called out his whole crew when Pen and Tate cornered Asa and Meg Clagg up in the foothills. One of Graham's hands had been wounded in that fight, and Pete wouldn't even let Tate pay the doctor bill. And now Tate was repaying such kindness by hiring gunmen to ruin Pete Graham.

He heard a rider approach the corral, but paid no attention to it until he heard Sheriff Green's voice. Then he started toward the house.

"I'm within my rights," Buskin was saying, "I told Pete I was foreclosing—told him to git off that range—"

"Yeah, I know all that," the lawman cut in sharply. "Legally, you may be right, but folks around here ain't gonna stand for your high-handed ways, Tate."

"And what do they think they're gonna do about it?" Tate asked sarcastically.

"You're liable to find out—when it's too late," Sheriff Green argued. "I come out here to try to talk some sense—"

"I know what I'm doing!" Tate cut in harshly. "And if people don't like it, let 'em try something. I'll show 'em how to finish it!"

The lawman cursed. "You're a fool, Tate. You're gitting too big for your britches. You think you're gonna pull a range grab in the Valley, but you won't get away with it. You ain't *that* big." He wheeled his horse and saw Pen. "Just because one gun-slinger got you out o' a tight spot with the Claggs and Yergens, don't think a bunch of tough gunnies can make you a big mogul!"

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When the lawman had gone, Pen walked up to Tate and cleared his throat. "Tate, I don't think it's too late. . . ."

"Ain't that big, huh!" Tate growled, not hearing Pen. "I'll show this damn country who's boss." He stamped back into the house.

Pen went to bed early that night. He groaned and puffed through rheumatic pain getting his boots off and crawling into his bunk. Joe Metaxa and the two new gunmen were playing poker on the bunkhouse table.

Pen had made up his mind what he was going to do. In the morning he planned to ride to Jim Walton's. And from there he was going to visit other ranches. Ten men, he figured, he'd need for the job; ten men to run three gun-slingers out of the country. He sighed. There'd been a time when he'd have tackled the job alone; but that was before rheumatism had cramped his joints.

But ten men could run Joe Metaxa and his crew out of the country. After that . . . well, he figured Tate Buskin would come to his senses. Pete Graham was still alive, and Tate could pay him for what damage he'd caused.

The sound of distant shots rolled through the night. The three gunnies kicked their chairs away and ran to the door, listening. Pen heard Tate's voice from the house.

"Sounds like they're from our range," he yelled.

"Over near Willow Springs," Metaxa yelled back. "Somebody's trying to stampede the herd. C'mon, boys!"

Pen blew the lamp out. He lay in his bunk and heard them race for the corral; heard the snort of horses as they slapped saddles on, then the beat of hoofs as they galloped into the night.

III

Pen lay there for a long time, listening for shots that would tell that Joe and his crew had met the marauders, but none came. After a few minutes, horses sounded outside. Pen raised up in bed. There were more than three horses in the approaching group; it couldn't be Joe and the men returning. He heard the ranchhouse door slam, then a man yelled.

"This is luck, boys! We caught the skunk at home—by himself! Don't try for that gun, Buskin!"

Pen rolled out of bed and pulled his pants on. From the dark door of the bunkhouse, he saw eight or ten mounted men up near the house. A man moved across the rectangle of light streaming from the ranchhouse. Jim Walton.

"Some of the boys are tolling your gun-slingers into the hills," Pen recognized the voice of Herb Munson, whose ranch bordered Pete Graham's. "Reckon by the time they git back, we'll be through."

Tate Buskin was standing in the light from the doorway, his hands held high. "Don't do nothing you'll be sorry for, Munson," he growled, but there was a slight quaver in his voice.

"Don't worry, we won't," a man

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laughed sarcastically. Pen recognized another rancher's voice.

"Git the kerosene, boys," Herb Munson yelled. "Douse every building with it—every haystack. Make sure everything will burn to the ground!"

"What about Tate?" another man asked. "Do we string him up?"

"If Pete Graham was dead, I'd say yes," Herb Munson grated. "But Pete'll pull through, so we'll just use a horse whip—like we planned."

"Damn you, Munson—you won't get away with this!" Tate Buskin yelled, his voice high and shrill with fear.

The sweat was dripping off old Pen's face, in spite of the chill night air. He'd seen things like this before. He knew the terror that could throttle a range when a range war started. Once guns started flaming, many men would die before their deadly work was done.

If they burned Tate out tonight, he'd still have his gun crew in the morning; and money to pay them—money to fight a range war. On the other hand, if they burned Tate out, maybe he'd come to his senses. Old Pen damned the fates that had left the decision up to him.

Then he straightened. He could still run Tate's gun crew off—in the morning. These ranchers were his friends; they'd listen to him. He reached back of the door and picked up the shotgun that stood there.

They didn't hear him approach; didn't know he was there until he spoke.

"Show's over, boys," Pen drawled.

"A scatter gun," growled Munson. He was edging his horse out of the light from the doorway. He stopped at the sound of double hammers clicking back into full cock.

"I said the show's over," Pen repeated slowly. "You're all silhouetted against that light. I can't miss."

"Pen Adams," a man muttered. "I didn't think you'd—"

"And why not?" Munson ground out bitterly. "It was Pen Adams' guns that built up Tate Buskin in the first place, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that's right," another muttered. "Once a gun-slinger, always a gun-slinger."

Old Pen winced at that, and was glad that the darkness hid his face. He'd spent eight years trying to wipe out the stigma of that name, and now fate had branded it on him deeper than ever. He'd hoped the ranchers would take a different view—but they hadn't.

Words fought to get past his lips. He wanted to explain what he was trying to do; wanted to tell them the misery they were bringing to their peaceful range; the fire-gutted ranches, the lonely graves that their actions would bring, but he couldn't say it. He didn't know how to begin.

"Ride, boys," was all he said. "And keep riding till you git home."

"Shows you a skunk can't change his stripe," a man muttered, as the ranchers wheeled their mounts and rode off.

"Reckon you saw you made a

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mistake," Pen called to Buskin from the shadows.

"I sure as hell do," Tate said, "and I ain't aiming to make the same mistake twice!" He turned back into the house and slammed the door.

Pen frowned. Tate's tone of voice had been funny—or had he imagined it? Then he shrugged. The trouble had been avoided; things were going to turn out all right now.

Pen was washing his face in the wash pan by the bunkhouse the next morning, when Tate walked up.

"Wanta thank you for what you done last night," Tate said. "Sure got myself in a tight."

"We all make mistakes," Pen told him. "But it's good when a man realizes that he's made one."

"Damn right," growled Tate. "I made one last night that I'll never make again. From now on I'm keeping a couple of tough hands with me—all the time!"

Pen's jaw dropped. He felt as though he'd been hit in the stomach.

"Any time anybody wants to jump me from now on," Tate went on, "they'll find a coupla fast gun hands ready to earn their pay." He slapped Pen on the back. "You been with me for eight years, and I ain't forgetting what you've done for me during that time," he went on. "When we git things the way we want 'em, I'll see that you're well fixed. I ain't a man to forget my friends. No sir!"

"Friends!" Pen echoed bitterly. "That was what those men were last night—friends of yourn oncet." He hung the towel back on the hook carefully. "Tate, when you hired me, you had a right to hire a gun-slinger. You needed one, and I reckon I earned my pay."

"Sure," Tate said heartily. "And a bonus, too. And I'll see that you git it."

Pen shook his head. "There was a time when I'd've hired my gun out just like Joe Metaxa is hiring his—not giving a damn about the right or the wrong of the job I was hired to do. But no more."

Tate Buskin's eyes narrowed. "You been moping around here like a sore grizzly since you got back. What's eating you? When I hired you, you was a gun-slinger—pure and simple—you didn't ask no questions then."

"I ain't the same man you hired," Pen told him. "These folks here on this range made a friend out o' me and I saw what I'd been missing. I don't want no part of any range grab, Tate. And what's more, I ain't gonna see my friends run over by the likes of you and Joe Metaxa!"

"The hell you say."

"I aim," Pen said slowly, "to run Joe Metaxa and his crew out o' the country. Without them, where'll you be, Tate?"

Buskin laughed. "Why, you darned fool, who you trying to scare? You think anybody's scared of them guns of yours—now?"

"They still shoot," Pen said simply.

Tate sneered. "And here I was trying to be good to you. I was

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going to give you a big cut out of this job—something to make you secure in your old age—and what kind o' thanks do I get—"

"I don't want that kind of security," Pen cut in.

"Then get the hell off this place!" snarled Tate. "Get off and stay off. The next time I see you, be ready!"

"I'm going," Pen said. He took a few steps, then turned. "I figure that it was my guns that built you up, Tate—so it's up to me to whittle you down to size again."

He rode away from the Leaning B with Tate Buskin's harsh laughter ringing in his ears.

IV

Ligeville was drowsing in the mid-afternoon sun, but there were plenty of horses tethered at the saloon, when Pen Adams rode down the main street.

He tied his own mount and walked into the saloon. A dead silence greeted him, as the men lined up at the bar eyed him coldly, silently. Herb Munson, Johnny Whittle, Ed Simpson, Jim Walton and others. All ranchers in the Valley—all men that Pen had counted his friends and neighbors—until last night.

"I reckon I made a fool play last night," Pen said wearily to no one in particular.

Sheriff Green got out of a chair and walked over. "Don't reckon you did," he said flatly. "You was earning the kind of pay that Tate hired you for in the first place. "You ain't wanted no more in Ligeville. Git out, and tell Tate Buskin to keep his whole crew out o' town."

"I ain't seeing Tate no more," Pen said. "We had an argument. I'm fired."

Jim Walton left the crowd and walked over. "You wouldn't string along with Tate, huh, Pen?"

"That's right."

Walton turned to the others. "I told you, boys, Pen's all right. We oughtn't to jump to conclusions."

"What about last night?" a rancher asked flatly.

"You wouldn't've settled anything last night," Pen said. "You'd just have started hell popping in general, and a lot of you might've been killed before it was over with. I had a better idea, but if you'd done what you started last night, it wouldn't have worked."

"Well, we're listening," Herb Munson said.

"Boys, about ten of us could run Joe Metaxa and his crew out o' the Valley before sundown," Pen said, his voice lifting hopefully. "There's only three of 'em, and a bunch of us could ride out there—"

"Hell! I thought it was a trick all the time!" Munson exploded disgustedly. "Hear him, boys," he jeered. "A bunch of us ride out there—so's we could be mowed down in our tracks!"

"There's only three of 'em," Pen said, bewildered. "And I'll ride ahead—"

Munson's face was red with fury. He jerked his gun and pointed it at Pen's middle.

"Git out o' here!" he snarled. Pen

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backed toward the door. "Must think we're fools!" he raged. "We know that ten more gunmen just rode out to Tate's. They're probably waiting to ambush us when you lead us . . ."

But Pen wasn't waiting to hear more. Blindly, he groped his way to his horse, climbed into the saddle and galloped out of town. He was miles away before he pulled to a stop and slumped wearily in the saddle.

He smiled bitterly. Now he knew what Tate meant when he said he wouldn't make the same mistake twice. Tate intended to keep a strong crew of men at the ranch, as well as on the range. Pen's face turned scarlet as he remembered how he must have looked, going into the saloon, and trying to urge the men to follow him. He twisted in the saddle to look at Jimpson Valley —the only home he'd ever known, where lived the only friends he'd ever had.

His gaze swung farther around, and he saw the thin spiral of smoke from the cook stove of the Leaning B. Tate Buskin's ranch. The man his guns had built into power. The ranchers of Jimpson Valley had befriended Pen Adams, and he'd repaid their kindness by building a man into power that was wrecking them all.

His hands dropped to his pistol butts, the movement bringing a twinge of pain to his face.

"About as fast," he muttered, "as molasses in a blizzard. . . ."

He took a last look at Jimpson Valley, then roweled his horse into a gallop. But the gallop slowed to a trot, and the trot slowed to a walk. After a while, Pen pulled to a stop, crawled stiffly out of the saddle and sat in the shade of a cottonwood tree.

He rolled a smoke, and through the gathering haze of dusk, looked out over Jimpson Valley—the only place he'd ever called home. And now he was leaving that home, all because of a greedy range hog. A greedy range hog that Pen Adams' guns had built into power.

As the sun sank lower, he wrestled with his thoughts. He climbed to his feet and tried his draw again, but it was slow and awkward, and the first cool breezes of night were already beginning to creep into his stiff joints.

Then he shrugged. He climbed into the saddle, neck-reined his horse toward the Leaning B, and urged the animal into a gallop.

A quarter of a mile from the Leaning B, he reined up. Complete darkness had fallen now. He was upwind from the ranch, and the night was still and quiet. He slipped to the ground. The night air was stiffening his joints, and he stifled a groan as his weight settled on his feet. Slipping his rifle from the saddle scabbard, he slapped the horse on the rump. He cupped his hands around his mouth.

"He-ey, Tate." The night wind carried his hail toward the ranchhouse. A moment later, all the lights around the ranch went out abruptly; doors slammed faintly.

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"It's me, Pen!" he yelled. "Wanta talk to you, Tate."

There was a long wait. That would give Tate time to send some men out to flank him, Pen thought. Then Tate's voice came faintly.

"What in blazes you want?"

Pen shut his eyes, and visualized every piece of brush; every gully, every boulder between himself and the house. Eight years he'd had to learn those things, and they were sharp in his mind. Then he hunkered on one knee, his rifle pointing toward a small-knoll that he couldn't see but knew was there.

"This is your last chance, Tate," he yelled back. "Pay off them gun-slicks—"

Crack! Orange flame spurted through the night—from the knoll. Almost instantly Pen returned the fire and heard a scream of pain. Then he was scuttling, crab fashion, straight for the knoll.

"There's your answer," Tate yelled. "Git him, boys!"

And answer enough, Pen thought grimly. *My guns built you up, Tate Buskin—it's gotta be my guns that'll tear you down.*

Guns began to thunder from around the ranchhouse. Most of the shooting was wild; although occasionally Pen heard the whine of a slug. He worked around the top of the knoll, heard the labored breathing of a badly wounded man and kept going.

"Spread out, damn it! Spread out!" Joe Metaxa yelled. Men were thrashing through the brush now, and their guns spurted at every shadow. Pen remembered where they'd buried a horse's carcass. The grave had sunk, leaving a depression in the ground about ten feet square. He scuttled for it, and lay flat in the depression. A man passed within fifteen feet of him. Pen waited a moment, then stalked cautiously toward the house.

"Got him yet?" Tate's voice came from an upstairs window.

"He must've slipped through us," Metaxa yelled at his men. "Double back."

"Git 'im, you fools!" Tate shrilled, and Pen grinned in the dark at the note of panic in the man's voice. He slipped forward a few feet and hunkered down behind a rusty roll of barbedwire.

"He's afoot!" Metaxa yelled. "We found his horse. Everybody back to the house—we'll fire the brush!"

A man was nearing the roll of barbedwire. Pen waited until he'd passed, then stood up and fell in step with the man. He muffled his mouth with his hand.

"I think the dirty son vamoosed," he muttered.

"Huh?" the man grunted in surprise. "Yeah, me too—Say! Who're—"

Pen swung his clubbed pistol, but it wasn't quick enough to stop the cry of alarm. Guns bellowed and roared, and old Pen was running. Running as he had never run before, with his joints shrieking in pain at every step, and his lungs almost bursting. Slugs whined and whipped around him. One thudded

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into his leg, and he went rolling, but when he staggered to his feet, he was at the back door of the ranch-house.

He kicked the door open, stepped inside and swung it shut. Four slugs ripped and splintered through it.

"Tate!" Pen bellowed.

A gun flamed from the front hallway. Slugs smashed plates and rattled pans in the kitchen. Then Pen heard Tate running up the steps. He stumbled into the front hall and started up the steps.

"There you are!"

The back door flung open and Joe Metaxa hulked in the opening. His gun was flaming. Pen fired and saw Metaxa stumble. He fired again, knowing that he was lighting himself up as a target for Tate Buskin's gun—and then feeling Tate's slugs hit him.

They knocked him back down the steps. Tate was coming down to make sure, when Pen shot him. He heard Tate's groan, and rolled out of the way just before Tate Buskin fell down the steps.

Pen was trying to get to his feet when he heard shots and yells outside—and one of those voices sounded like Jim Walton's. He heard the rattle of gunfire die down as Tate Buskin's newly hired gun-slicks realized the fight was over and they had lost. Horses raced through the night, as hired gunnies left the country.

Somebody flung the front door open. A match flared, and Jim Walton was bending over Pen, feeling for his wounds, trying to make him comfortable and telling him that the doctor was on the way.

"How come, Jim?" old Pen asked through his pain. "Kind o' surprised to see you. . . ."

"I talked till my tonsils were sore, trying to make the others believe you were on the square after you left the saloon," Jim Walton said a little unsteadily. "They were hard to convince. In fact, some of the boys started to follow you just to prove that you were trying to double-cross us."

Sheriff Green came in and heard Jim talking. "When the boys saw you weren't going back to Tate's, they hotfooted it to town and got the rest of us," the lawman stuck in.

"We were close enough to hear you and Tate yelling at each other when the fight started," Jim explained. "And we'd've got into the fight sooner only some of the boys were afraid of hitting you in the dark."

Pen smiled. He still had his friends; they'd be paying him neighborly visits while his wounds healed. . . .

THE END

Answers to Scrambled Words on page 86.

1. savvy 2. spruce 3. fire 4. gate 5. creek 6. valley 7. meadow 8. alder 9. livery 10. poplar 11. trout 12. buck 13. sage 14. boardwalk 15. stockman

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WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

by JOHN NORTH

AUTO-CAMPING was made to order for those who like to travel and live outdoors while doing it. When it comes to hunting, fishing, or plain relaxing in the open spaces, the auto camper, more than anyone else, can write his own ticket. Bed and bedding with him, he doesn't need to stick to town or city-dotted main highways to find a place to sleep at night.

On week-end jaunts or longer trips, a car will get an outdoorsman more and further places with more flexibility than any other form of travel. Besides it's economical, and a lot of fun.

State Parks and the virgin wilderness of State Forests, all accessible by car, are scattered across the country from Maine to California. Most of them have set aside areas where camping facilities are available under local Forest or State Park regulations. Even in the primitive sections of the West—central Idaho for example—a progressive program of road building and road improvement in National Forest Reserves under Forest Service jurisdiction has opened up to the auto camper scenic areas previously reachable only by pack train or forest trail.

Good fishing regions and plain outdoor recreation areas alike await the vacation tripper who travels in a car. And most any car is suitable, provided it is in reasonably good mechanical condition. That jaloppy you've been hanging onto will do nicely for an auto-camp trip this summer.

For one thing, you know all its little idiosyncrasies. You're not so apt to be dismayed if it gets scratched up a trifle by brush or brambles in the woods. More importantly, you have, or at least you should have, a pretty good idea by this time of what it costs per mile to run the thing, allowing for gas, oil, greasing and perhaps some minor repairs.

If you have never checked on this, the mileage basis is a good system to use in roughly prefiguring the expenses of an auto camping trip. Assuming you have a light car that will give you 18 to 20 miles per gallon of gas under average running conditions, good rubber and no major repairs to contend with, an allowance of 2 cents a mile per person ought to cover postwar travel in comfortable shape.

This should handle the ordinary costs when 3 or 4 people are in the party and most of the cooking is done outdoors camp style. Items

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included under ordinary costs are gas, oil, food, cabin-site fees, occasional toll-bridge costs, picnic lunches and even an overnight stop in a cabin now and then. Not included, of course, are the original cost of camping equipment, car depreciation, or items like new tires.

If only two are in the car, the per capita cost for the same style of travel will be slightly higher, about 2½ or 3 cents per mile per person. Before the war, on a 3 to 4 person basis, a similar trip could be made for about 1 cent a mile for each member of the party. But even at the 2-cent postwar figure, it is economical outdoor vacationing. A 10- or 12-day, 2,500-mile trip shouldn't cost more than $200, or $50 a person, if 4 people go along.

Auto campers can take everything they need with them in the car. But don't overdo it. Use common sense in what you take. Carry along only what you will actually need, packed in the car as efficiently as possible.

Of first importance is a tent. If you already have one and it fits your needs, well and good. Take it along. If you plan on buying one, be sure that it's waterproof, ventilated, and equipped with a fly that will keep out both rain and insects.

A wall tent affords roomy camp comfort, particularly if you plan to spend more than one night at a single place. But it takes time and requires two men to set it up properly so that every panel is taut. It also needs more stakes and poles than some of the other types. A 7 by 9 ft. size will do for two. A 9 by 12 ft. size of strong, fairly heavy canvas has room for more people.

For overnight or short stays, and easier setting up, the marquee type is perhaps better. One man can erect it in a few minutes. Properly braced at the corners, it will stay secure against even a high wind.

The main objection of most campers to a marquee-type tent, its weight, need not be such an important consideration to the auto camper. The larger sizes weigh around 75 lbs., much of the weight being in the steel frame that supports the peak and corners. Smaller sizes weigh about 60 lbs.

Other important items to remember are sufficient bedding and blankets, an adequate supply of cooking utensils, and a good camp ax. To many, open fire cooking is part of the fun of camping, but the auto camper can, if he prefers, carry along one of the compact, folding types of gasoline camp cook stoves. They take up but very little room.

Happy traveling, J. K., of Worcester, Massachusetts, Four Vets from Evansville, Indiana, C. T., of Tulsa, Oklahoma and the rest of you who have written in asking about auto camping trips.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

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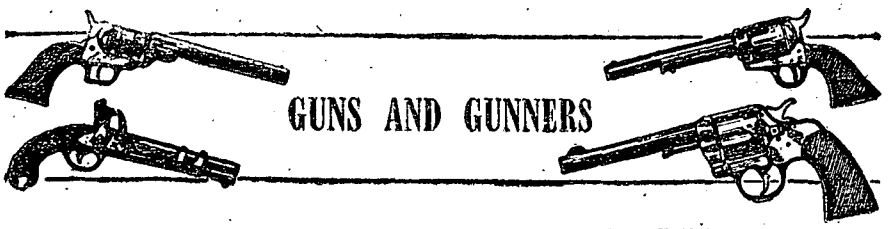

GUNS AND GUNNERS

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

This department will try to identify special cartridges for you but a complete description is necessary. There are many variations of everything, and we will need measurements, marking and all available data.

THE cartridge collector boys are back. We've heard a lot lately from chaps who are starting new collections and from others who are adding to old ones, but this particular letter puts a new slant on the game.

"I haven't a cartridge collection," this reader writes. "Some day I want to start one, but living in the city, I have had little chance. For some time I have been collecting all of the information I could on ammunition. What can you tell me about special cartridges of interest used during the war?"

Here's some information on interesting oddities I ran into overseas in intelligence work.

First, rifle and machine gun blank cartridges, used for training. Hollow wooden bullets are widely used on the continent. Some are round nose, some pointed. Various colors mark them—red, green, blue, maroon, brown, natural wood, and so forth. The frugal French have both hollow wood and paper bullets, their manuals stating that the wood is for machine guns, paper for rifles.

Another type of blank is known as the grenade blank. A discharger is attached to the muzzle of a rifle, a grenade inserted, and a special propelling blank used. Some of these have a "rose crimp"—the mouth of the case is pinched together in five or six folds. In others there is a very short wooden bullet, also of various colors.

The Italians had a very interesting type in several calibers; a round-nose bullet, whose jacket was composed of several layers of rolled-up thin brass foil. Inside was compressed lead dust. To hold the thing together there were several ring-type grooves around the body of the bullet. When this bullet hits the atmosphere, the foil unravels and the powdered lead scatters.

In the United States, blank cartridges for revolvers have long been made. The cartridge case has a deep mouth crimp over a cardboard disc covering the powder. There is not sufficient recoil to such blanks to operate the action of an automatic pistol, so we do not make them in automatic calibers. In Germany, Belgium, and other countries, blanks are made for automatics. Some have compressed waxed-paper bullets.

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Others are made of powdered asbestos and fiber, mixed with a wax binder.

In Germany, there were a number of revolver and shotgun cartridges made before the war as "fireworks." Made in .38 caliber up, these could be used in standard guns. A variety of colored flares could be shot skyward for holiday celebrations. Although I have seen many in .38 caliber, they are more commonly found in .410, 32 gauge, 28 gauge, 20 gauge, 16 gauge and 12 gauge.

France had some interesting freaks in military ammunition. One of the standard French cartridges is the old 8 mm. Lebel. This cartridge had a unique bullet, in that it was solid copper instead of the usual hard-metal jacket with lead core. You will find many of these with the entire nose of the bullet cut off squarely about one-quarter inch in front of the case mouth. This is called *cartouche à balle sectionnée*—sectionalized ball.

Another similar type had the sides of the bullet machined flat, which, had the tip been cut off, would have made a "screwdriver point." This was called *cartouche à balle fraisée*—frilled bullet. Both were widely used in street fighting during the liberation of Paris and must have created wicked wounds.

When you get into sporting shotgun cartridges, you find some interesting types. Belgium developed shells with shot having cube shape. The "square" shot were supposed to be better for birds at short range, but although the idea came out in the 1920's, it never was too popular.

Germany created the Rottweil Metall, an all-aluminum case with a rose crimp having ten folds. The center was sealed with lacquer. I have shot many and they perform well and are 100 percent waterproof. The head is blackened with a bright "5" or other figure showing. This indicates size of shot.

All-metal cases of brass, steel, zinc, aluminum and possibly other metals seem to have been made in Belgium. I have seen them made in two parts, with a brass head and steel tube. I've also seen combinations of metal and paper, with the metal covering the paper tube almost to the mouth of the case, just leaving enough paper exposed for the crimp.

For the next few years, the life of the collector is going to be very interesting. But before you attempt to add specimens to your collection, find out what they are—some are very dangerous. And, for your own safety, do not attempt to collect cartridges of greater than 50 caliber—in the military field.

A last minute report from American plants indicates no shortage in any of the popular hunting cartridges this fall. A few of the older types will be scarce, but most of them are back on the market.

Captain Sharpe is back after more than three years in the Army and your letters concerning firearms will receive his prompt attention. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

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MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

FINDING metal is the prospector's first job. Equally important is knowing how to secure legal possession of any new mineral discovery.

In the United States, mineral claims may be staked on unoccupied portions of the public domain, and prospecting is free. Vast areas of public land remain in the western States. Much of this land is in districts known to be mineralized. The eastern and southern States (with the exception of Arkansas, Florida and Louisiana) are not included in the Federal mining regulations. Nor is Texas, which has no Federal public domain.

Federal mining laws apply to staking and acquiring mining claims on vacant public lands in Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming—and Alaska. Claims can be staked under the general mining laws in mineral lands in National Forests in these States, but not, generally speaking, in National Parks or National Monument land reservations. Mt. McKinley National Park in Alaska, and Death Valley National Monument in California are exceptions.

There are a few other variations regarding lands in which claims may or may not be staked. The regulations vary from time to time and the details are too technical to go into here. The safest bet is for a prospector to check with local U.S. Land Offices, or at the county seat of the county in which he is prospecting, on what lands are and are not open for location in any particular district.

In any event land belonging to private persons can only be entered by agreement with, or permission of, the owner. On the other hand many of the western States have, in addition to large blocks of public domain open for prospecting and claim staking, quantities of State lands. These are sometimes in mineral country, and as a rule may be entered and prospected and claims staked on them in event of a mineral discovery under the mining laws of the State. State lands are sometimes located on a lease basis.

State mining regulations should be checked at the county seat. Aside from the laws pertaining to prospecting on State lands, regulations vary in the different States regarding the filing of location notices, boundary marking and so forth.

M. A., writing in from Mont-

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gomery, Alabama, has asked us about this matter of State mining regulations. "Do they differ?" he queried. The answer is: "They do."

We'll cite some cases. But first, for background, remember that under Federal mining regulations a placer claim is a 20-acre tract which in surveyed country should conform to legal subdivisions and section lines. A lode claim is limited to 1,500 feet in length and 300 feet on each side of the lode or vein at the surface. End lines must be parallel.

Mining locations may be made by citizens of the United States, without regard to sex or the residence of the locators. Minors who have reached the age of discretion can stake a claim. No limit is placed by Federal statutes on the number of locations that may be made by an individual, or a company. But before staking a claim, actual mineral must be discovered on the ground.

Now, coming to State regulations and their differences, a check-up shows that while all western States have enacted laws regarding the location of mining claims, New Mexico only requires the location notice to be posted at a conspicuous place on the claim and Oregon merely provides that the notice be posted on the claim. The rest specify that the location notice be posted "at the point of discovery" of the mineral claimed. Other minor variations in the regulations are involved.

Similarly, all the western States now insist on the filing of a copy of the location notice at some designated central place, usually the county seat, for a permanent record. The time allowed from the date of making the discovery or posting the notice on the claim to filing the copy varies widely. The cost of filing such notices is nominal, varying from $1.00 to $2.00 in the different States.

Other differences in State mining laws have to do with such things as discovery shafts on lode or hard-rock claims. For instance, no such shaft or excavation is required in Utah. A 10-foot shaft is called for in Alaska, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington and Wyoming. In Arizona and Nevada the discovery shaft must be at least 4 by 6 feet in section. Idaho laws require a shaft 16 square feet in cross section, or containing 160 cubic feet. Montana provides for a discovery shaft that must contain 150 cubic feet, at least 75 cubic feet of which must be dug at the point of discovery.

And so it goes. The principles of claim staking are the same throughout the western mining States, but the details vary. That's why it behooves the prospector to keep posted on the local mining regulations in any district he intends to prospect.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.

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CHITTAM CAMP CUTTHROAT

by GIFF CHESHIRE

Andy Crispin didn't trust Frank Bonner any further than he could see him and with snow due to block Lobo Pass, he figured he'd better not even trust him that far!

WITH evening, a chill breeze brisked across the little chittam camp high in the Greybacks, and Andy Crispin knew that time was growing short. Frank Bonner and his hundred-mule pack string were days late. While he ate his supper, Andy kept watching the brushless ravine below the little bare knoll on which he was camped, worry growing in him. Bonner was a slippery individual, but there was no reason for his not coming.

During the summer seasons Bonner plied a profitable trade packing through the mountains between the railhead of Dry Wells and scattered inland settlements. He had agreed

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to bring his string here on the last day of October to pack out Andy's summer peel. It was a week past that date now.

"Dad-gum him!" Andy grated to himself. "Any day snow's going to close Lobo Pass. If he's up to one of his tricks again—"

His gaze swept anxiously over the two hundred and ninety-odd burlap sacks packed tight with the chittam bark he had peeled and dried that summer and the little dab still spread out over the coldly sunny patches on the knoll to dry. All his hopes and dreams were bound up in it, and it filled him with helpless anxiety that now his success or failure depended entirely on Frank Bonner, whom few men trusted.

It was the alerting of his own saddler and pair of pack horses, picketed below the camp in a small mountain meadow, that drew Andy to his feet. For a moment he could see nothing in the ravine below the meadow. Then Bonner's first long-eared animals came into sight. Elation bubbled in Andy as he set down his plate and moved in long, eager strides down the grassy knoll.

Bonner had brought his entire string, and he was grinning as he rode up to Andy. "Mister, before you start cussing me out, let me tell you you're lucky I got here at all! They ain't kept me so busy in ten years!"

The young peeler grinned back, his cheer restored. "Long as you got here, reckon it don't make much never mind. But I was plumb worried snow'd close the pass!"

"Storm's liable to blow up any time now!" Bonner admitted, and he appeared more cheered than worried by the prospect. His beady eyes fixed on Andy for a long moment, and he seemed about to say more. Then he changed his mind and swung out of the saddle. He was a big man, unkempt and rough, and a vague shiftiness and cruelty always glinted in his eyes.

Andy helped Bonner take the pack saddles off the mules and get them picketed in the lush grass of the mountain meadow. Then he took the packer back to camp and gave him his supper. He needed Bonner, even if he didn't quite trust the packer. Bonner was the only man in the country who could get his peel out for him, and all of Andy Crispin's eager young hopes for the future were pinned on this one summer's work.

Bonner interspersed his wolfish eating with small talk about the region. When he had finished, he tossed his tin plate and fork onto the ground for Andy to clean, and began to make himself a smoke. Again he worried a thought in his mind but failed to express it.

"Won't take long to strike camp in the morning, once we get the sacks loaded," Andy ruminated. "If we get a good start tomorrow, we'd ought to be ready to move out by noon. That'd put us through the pass the next day, and we should be in Dry Wells the day after that."

Bonner nodded but said nothing. Andy couldn't help the elation that lighted his own blond face. He hadn't been in Dry Wells or any

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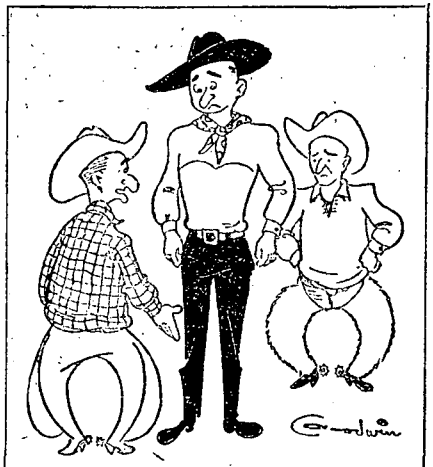
other civilized place since early summer, and it was going to be a pleasure to get back there. He wondered again just how Sally Michaels would greet him, or he her, for that matter. He wasn't one for fancy words, and he supposed he would prove as tongue-tied and stumbling as ever, even if a year ago they had got engaged to be married.

He didn't mind Bonner's unwonted silence, for it gave him time to think about his plans. When a forty-a-month puncher found out a town girl like Sally was willing to marry him, he also found himself growing mighty ambitious of a sudden. Andy had already banked a little nest egg saved out of his pay toward a small spread of his own some day. When he won Sally, that process had seemed far too slow. He was a resourceful young fellow, by and large, so he had summarily quit his job and packed three hundred burlap bags into this mountain wilderness to be filled with chittam bark. Before he left he made arrangements with Bonner to bring up the pack string. All summer he had worked like a beaver, filling his sacks while the sap was up and peeling was easy.

It had been a monotonous process, spotting the branching, silvery chittam trees scattered throughout the forests. Then they had to be felled and peeled to the uppermost branch, and the green bark had to be packed back to camp and spread on the sunny slopes to dry. That was all accomplished now, with the dried bark broken into chips and sacked. The summer's peel, Andy figured, would bring him nearly fifteen hundred dollars after he had got it to Dry Wells and shipped to the drug outfit. There was always a good market for chittam bark which was used for making several medicines, including cascara. Fifteen hundred dollars was more than he could save in five years of riding for the big Horseshoe outfit—enough, with scraping, management and luck, to set him up on his own this coming winter with a pretty young bride.



"With them legs, I'm afraid you weren't cut out to be a cowboy!"

Frank Bonner spoke suddenly. "We ain't discussed my pay for this job, Andy."

Andy looked at him closely, all his suspicions that Bonner was cooking something up crystallizing. "I figured to pay you whatever's fair, Frank."

The packer grinned, slowly and with open cunning. "Hear you're fixing to buy Jay Oldham's little spread and marry Sally Michaels.

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Reckon you'd hate like blazes to wait another year for that!" –

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if you don't get your bark out pretty pronto, it'll be here for the winter. Maybe it'd start rotting before spring."

Andy stared in alarm. "Look here, Bonner! Your tariff's posted in Berg's store, down in Dry Wells. You pack to Hawk Roost for four bits a hundred. That's farther'n this and through the same kind of country. Don't you go fixing to hold me up!"

Bonner yawned elaborately. "I can leave here in the morning and go on over to North Powder. Jim Sundee's got a load of hides he wants packed out. So it's up to you whether I pack your chittam, instead. I figure it's worth a dollar a hundred, considering what it means to you."

Fury filled Andy Crispin. To be nicked for a packing charge like that would upset his plans, which he had figured down to the last penny: a spread, a starter of beef cattle, furniture for his bride, and equipment. There wasn't a place where he hadn't already shaved to the quick.

"Blast you, Bonner! So you crowded winter as much as you could on purpose! Dollar a hundred'd pay you three hundred for the job, just twice your regular charge!"

"You know any other way of getting your bark down to Dry Wells?"

Andy was forced to shake his head. Bonner grinned, ground out his cigarette and strolled down to the meadow to look at his mules. He seemed entirely sure of himself, and Andy reckoned he had a right to be. All summer Andy had relied on Bonner, and it was too late to be thinking of alternate means of getting the bark out. It looked as if Bonner had him.

As Bonner spread his soogans down in the meadow with the mules he issued a warning. "I'm a mighty light sleeper and plumb quick with a six-gun," he intoned softly. "Wouldn't go figuring any tricks, was I you, Andy."

There was a heavy frost that night, and the next morning the cold, early winter sun failed to show itself in the leaden overcast. Bonner seemed pleased at this when he came down to the chittam camp for breakfast.

"Been thinking it over, Andy," he said, grinning. "Dollar a hundred ain't a fair price, considering the circumstances."

Andy looked at him quickly. "Glad to hear that, Frank. I can't spare—"

"No, sir!" the packer cut in. "Considering how close we are to first snow and the pass we got to go through, I figure it's worth a dollar and a half. Do we load up now, or do I go on to North Powder for those hides?"

After a long moment Andy said,

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"We load, I guess," but his voice sounded weak.

Fury filled him as he sacked the last of the dried bark. He cursed himself for having relied on Bonner, for the man's sly scheming was notorious, as was the fat bank account he had built with it. But Bonner packed in this country all summer, and it had seemed the natural way to get the peel out.

Before they started to load the sacked bark, three sacks to the mule, Bonner spoke again.

"Don't reckon you're fixed to pay the freight in advance, Andy?"

Andy shook his head angrily. "Four hundred and fifty dollars on me? I ain't got four and a half dollars. Anyhow, three hundred of it's shakedown, Bonner!"

Again the cunning grin cracked the packer's swart face. "Well, you're a man of his word, everybody says. But I ain't packing out your bark and have you crawfish, claiming you was robbed. Give me your note for the four-fifty." He fished a stubby pencil and a crumpled sheet of paper from his shirt pocket.

"Look here!" Andy blazed. "I ain't ever crawfished out of a deal yet! If I agree to pay your four-fifty, even if I do know it's a shakedown, I'll pay it without squawking!"

"We'll put her in writing!" Bonner maintained, his small eyes going ugly.

"Another thing!" Andy rasped, suddenly trailing a thought of his own. "How do I know you ain't going to stop every ten miles and up your charge on me? I'll go four-fifty, and I'll pay you in hard cash the minute we get to the bank in Dry Wells and I'll keep my trap shut about your stinkin' holdup! But I gotta know I'm going to get my bark put down in Dry Wells for that amount before we load a sack!"

Bonner looked at him closely, impressed by the state of Andy's temper. "Then we'll get it in writin', like I said, to protect you as well as me. Tell you what. I'll—"

"I'll tell *you!*" Andy contradicted. "Before I'll pay you a cent over a dollar and a half a hundred, the bark can set here and rot! You give me a receipt for the chittam and your agreement to pack it down to Dry Wells for four hundred and fifty dollars. That'll protect us both. I'll

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know you ain't going to hike your price any more. And we won't say nothing about weight, so after you get the stuff unloaded I can't prove how much you hauled!"

After a thoughtful moment, Bonner nodded his head. "Sounds fair enough. I'll write her out!" He poised the pencil over the paper, ruminating.

"If you're scared, write it like this," Andy advised. "Say, 'I hereby agree to deliver one consignment of chittam bark to Andy Crispin at the railroad depot in Dry Wells for the sum of four hundred and fifty dollars, figured at my regular tariff.' That way it don't say how much the stuff actually weighs."

"Yeah, that's it!" Bonner wrote it out eagerly, signed the paper and handed it to Andy.

By noon the bark was loaded, camp struck, and the long snaky string was on its way. The sun broke through the overcast, spilling a golden warmth over the uplands, pushing the threat of snow into the background again. Nonetheless, winter was very near, and for that and other reasons Andy Crispin did not regret the bargain he had made. The next day they went through Lobo Pass without incident and started on the long drop to the Yellow River cattle graze and the cow town of Dry Wells.

Before they broke camp that last morning, Andy said: "Don't reckon you'll need any help from here on out, Bonner. I'll take my outfit and ride on to town. Somebody there I'm mighty anxious to lay eyes on!"

Bonner regarded him suspiciously. "Look here, you got anything up your sleeve?"

"Only a flea-bit lump of muscle!" Andy returned cheerfully.

"You better stick with me!" Bonner said uneasily. "I might need you."

"The chittam's your responsibility until you get it delivered to Dry Wells!" Andy answered. "I got your agreement to deliver it, right in my pocket!" He turned toward his waiting saddler and the two pack horses.

The packer stalked toward him, his eyes glinting. "I just think I'll take that little piece of paper back, bub!"

"Try and get it!"

Andy's eyes had been fixed on the packer's nervous right hand, knowing that Bonner wasn't going to like this move. He shot forward now before Bonner's palm could grip his gun, his shoulder impacting against the man's broad chest. Bonner stumbled backward, arms flailing. Jerking Bonner's six-gun from leather, Andy flung it into the brush,

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then squared off. It was a job he meant to enjoy.

Frank Bonner was taller and heavier than Andy, but booze and high living had not helped his stamina. Andy drew on his hard-working months in the open air. For a long while it was a grim, furious, unpredictable battle. Bonner flattened Andy with a hard right that landed full in the peeler's mouth, and Andy spat blood and clambered to unsteady feet. For a moment he had all he could do to hang on, then he began to dish out cool, careful punishment of his own.

The pack mules, as well as Andy's own animals, skittered in the first excitement, then settled again to indifferent browsing in the lush grass. An eagle wheeled in the still blue sky, and for a time the only sound was the thud of hard-driven fists, the grunt of escaping wind.

At long last the big arms and fists coming at Andy began to waver. He had waited for this through a long spell of weariness and pain. He mustered energy and put the last ounce he had of it into that last whipping, hooking right. He stood heaving above the fallen packer for another moment, then whirled toward his saddle horse.

"I could have helped him load if he'd acted like a white man," he thought ruefully, "but now it's up to him."

It was evening when Frank Bonner's pack string snaked down the single street of Dry Wells. Riding in the drag and furiously cracking his blacksnake, Bonner presented a puffed and battered appearance. Waiting at the depot, Andy looked no better save for the fact that he was more cheerful. He had shipping tags made out, and as the surly, silent packer unloaded his mules, Andy tied on the tags and stacked the sacked bark in the freight house, to be shipped on the first outbound freight.

When the last mule had been unloaded, Bonner stalked toward him. "You got my four hundred and fifty dollars, Crispin?" he demanded harshly.

"Come down to the bank with me and I'll get it."

"Bank's closed by now! Blast you, I want that four-fifty and the paper!"

"Bank's still open," Andy returned. "I asked Phil Grosser to wait for us."

Grosser was manager of the Drovers and Grangers Bank, and he looked up when Andy and Bonner came through the side door of the bank.

"Thanks for waiting for us," Andy told him, when the banker had counted out the four hundred and fifty dollars. "Never like to carry that much money around on me. There you are, Bonner, your money in full. Don't reckon I need a receipt, seeing as Grosser witnessed the payment."

Bonner took the money, still glaring. "And I'll take that . . . uh, bill o' lading, Crispin!"

Andy shrugged. "You'll have to talk to Phil about that. I sold it to him."

"You what?"

The banker grinned. "That's

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right, Bonner. Just like a stockman ships cattle and sells the bill of lading at the bank for quick cash. The bark belongs to the bank, now—all nine hundred sacks."

"Nine hundred sacks!" Bonner roared. "There was only three hundred—"

"Surely you're mistaken!" Grosser interrupted coldly. He took the improvised bill of lading from his pocket and examined it carefully. "Says here you agree to deliver a consignment of chittam bark to Dry Wells for Andy Crispin for a revenue of four hundred and fifty dollars figured at your regular packing charge. Your published charge for that kind of haul is fifty cents a hundred. Which means you must've accepted a shipment of about nine hundred sacks."

Bonner whirled on Andy, his eyes blazing. "Why, you tricky—"

Andy grinned. "Wouldn't make that kind of talk, was I you, Bonner! You've delivered three hundred sacks, and it's up to you to come through with another six hundred! Ain't you got that much chittam, Bonner?"

"You know I ain't, you young—"

The banker shook his head sadly, but his cool, level eyes harbored amusement. "As the carrier in the deal, you're legally responsible for it. Since the bank now owns the shipment, you can come through with the chittam bark or pay for the shortage. You've got a nice little account here, and if you don't come through with the rest of that shipment by banking hours tomorrow, I'm going over to the courthouse fast to get an attachment!"

The anger in Bonner's eyes gave place to misery. He looked from the banker to Andy. When he spoke his voice had turned humble and wheedling. "Look here, Andy! Let's just call it quits. Here's your four-fifty back. I hauled your bark gratis, see! You tell Grosser there was only three hundred sacks!"

Andy accepted the money, peeled off a hundred and fifty dollars and gave it back. "Want to pay you a fair price, Bonner. Take it and get!" He watched the packer stumble out of the bank, then grinned at Phil Grosser. "Thanks, mister! Reckon Bonner don't ever need to know the deal between you and me was phony."

"Glad to help you," the banker replied. "He's had a lesson coming for a long while. Never did like that . . ." His voice trailed off and he shrugged and grinned. Andy Crispin was already heading for the door, looking for the girl he hadn't seen since spring.

THE END

This brand tells you that its owner has been honorably discharged from the armed forces of World War II.

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RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING

Bull-tailing, a popular sport among early Mexican cowboys in the brush country of southwest Texas, may have been the forerunner of bulldogging steers as practiced in modern rodeos. In the brush-country version longhorns were used. The big, rangy, half-wild longhorn had a long, limber tail. Tailing one of the beasts required a good, swift cowhorse and a rider with plenty of nerve. Galloping at full speed, the rider reached down, grabbed the longhorn's tail, twisted it around the horn of his saddle, then swerved sharply to one side. Properly executed, the result was a vicious throw that knocked the breath clean out of the startled animal and sometimes even snapped its neck. It was a rough, lightning-fast game.

Contrary to many a tenderfoot's notion, rotting vegetation in water does not necessarily make it bad to drink. It may be unpalatable without being dangerous. Disease germs are of animal, not vegetable, origin. Thus, though unsavory in appearance and color, swamp or bog water in wilderness or unsettled country is usually safely drinkable. Straining it will improve both its color and its taste. Many a thirsty cowboy in the West has drunk such water and been mighty glad it was there, using for convenience the handiest strainer available—his bandanna.

The coming of the white man and his firearms to America meant destruction for much of the country's former wildlife. It decimated the wild turkey, doomed the buffalo, made the wild pigeon extinct and wrought similar havoc on other food and game animals. But it was a break for the porcupine. Indians used to hunt the animated pincushions avidly for their meat and quills, the latter being used for ceremonial decorations. Today, because it is the one food animal a man lost in the woods can easily kill, porky is protected by numerous game laws.

Mr. King will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

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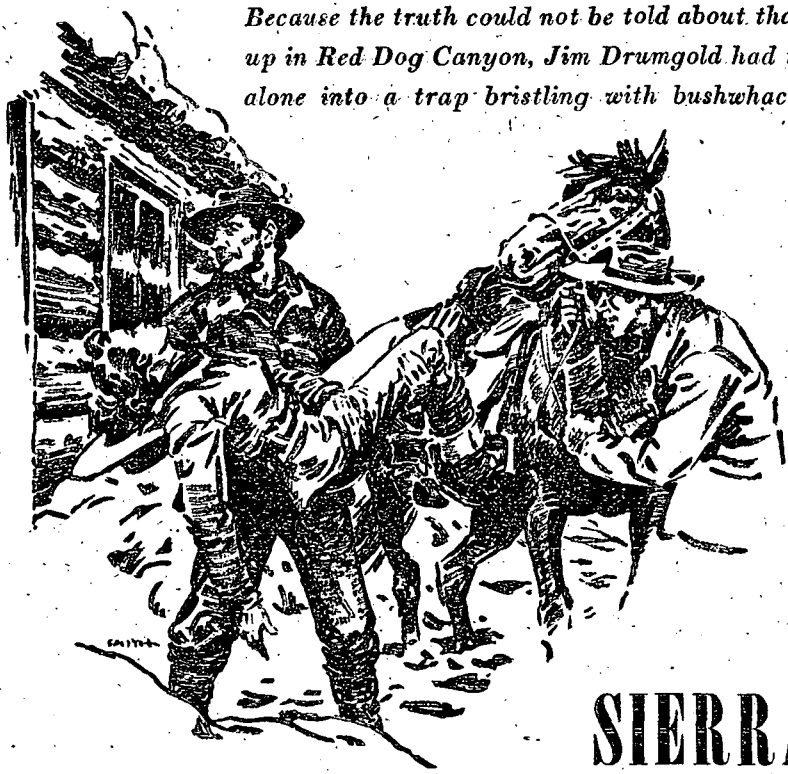
Because the truth could not be told about that hold-up in Red Dog Canyon, Jim Drumgold had to walk alone into a trap bristling with bushwhack guns



SIERRA SHOWDOWN

by JOSEPH CHADWICK

WINTER had come to the high Sierras, and during the night a short-lived blizzard had built a drift against the cabin door. In the morning Jim Drumgold had to dig his way out, and a narrow path to the big log barn of the Drumgold Express Company took an hour's shoveling. By then, a voice was hailing from across the ice-fringed Trumbolt. A horsebacker wanted to be ferried over.

Resting his shovel and squinting against the dazzling glare of sun on snow, Jim studied the distant rider and muttered, half aloud: "Kate Harvey." Turning to the barn, he lifted his voice: "Hank—a visitor!"

Old Hank Mitchum came from his

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morning chore of watering and graining the pack mules and saddle horses. Besides being hostler, the old-timer had the job of poling the flatboat back and forth across the Trumbolt River. Hank was bent by the years, but his eyes were still keen.

"Kate Harvey," he muttered, staining the snow with brown tobacco juice and giving his young boss a speculative look. "You better take to the hills, bucko. That's a Texas girl, and she's got a Texas temper."

"Fetch her across," Jim said.

He turned back to his shoveling as Hank plodded through the drifts to the stream, where the flatboat was tied up to a pile landing. He tried not to think—or to feel. But he knew that Kate Harvey, just back from a month's trip to Frisco, was coming to have it out with him. This would be their first meeting since the killing of the man she was to have married.

Another, younger, man came from the barn and looked toward the river. His voice jumped: "Jim, that's Kate!"

Jim turned and faced Kate's brother and he saw his own uneasiness mirrored on the boyish face that belied Dick Harvey's twenty-five years. Dick was the sort that never wholly matured. He was husky enough to work the mountain trails with a pack train, but Jim Drumgold knew him to be weak and unstable. Dick's eyes were puffed and bloodshot, and in the harsh morning light he looked pale. Without a doubt, he was suffering the aftermath of a night of heavy drinking.

"You look like hell," Jim told him. "Kate'll know something's wrong, soon as she sees you. You keep swilling rotgut whiskey, and one day you'll talk too much."

"You think she's taking it hard?"

"Sure, she's taking it hard," Jim growled. "She was to marry Pierson, wasn't she? But you keep your mouth shut, and everything will be all right—for you."

Turning, he walked to his cabin, to wait by the doorway. He watched Hank Mitchum break the ice away from the flatboat's hull and pole the unwieldy craft into midstream. It didn't take long to bring Kate and her paint pony across, and as soon as she rode off the boat she turned her mount toward Jim's cabin. Her face was reddened by the cold, and its usual brightness was dulled by grief. Her eyes, once aglow with laughter, now seemed empty and lifeless.

"Well, Jim?" she said.

She had reined in with her pony sideways to him. She was slim enough to sit a horse man-fashion, and pretty enough in a fine strong way to wear mannish dress. Her yellow hair was hidden by a flat-crowned gray sombrero. She wore faded Levis and was bundled in a heavy wool-lined coat. She was Kate Harvey, the Texas girl, and to Jim Drumgold there could be no other woman like her. He looked at her, but he found nothing to say.

"What's this I hear, Jim?" Kate demanded. Her voice was hollow, when always before it had been full of laughter and like pleasant music.

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"Kate, there no use torturing yourself," Jim said.

A braided quirt hung from her right wrist, and now it slapped angrily against her Levi-sheathed leg. "Don't hedge, Jim. Talk up."

"What can I say? You must have heard it all?"

"I want to hear it from you."

He groped for words. He did not want to hurt her. Had the choice been his, Jim Drumgold would have shielded Kate Harvey from all life's hurts. He was in love with her, and he had been since that day ten months ago when she and Dick and their ne'er-do-well father came to Old Washoe to strike it rich panning gold from mountain streams—a hope that had quickly faded. But the choice had not been Jim's, for Kate had lost her heart to Clint Pierson who, among other things, had been something of a ladies' man.

"Two weeks ago I started out for Carson City," Jim said slowly, "with a string of pack mules. I planned to pick up some freight for Garrison. I started out with empty packs, except for some pay dirt a prospector was sending out. There was about eight thousand dollars in dust and nuggets in the poke—enough to attract road agents. . . ."

The girl's gray eyes bored at him.

"Well, it was late afternoon when I headed out and by night fall I was trailing through Red Dog Canyon. I figured on traveling all night, so I didn't make camp. I should have because I headed into an ambush. There were four men in the wild bunch, and there was a lot of shooting. Two of my mules were killed before I got my gun out. . . ."

He paused, seeing no belief in the gray eyes.

"Go on," Kate said.

"I had to defend myself," Jim went on dully. "I used my saddle carbine. . . . No," he corrected, catching himself. "I used my six-gun. Anyway, I winged one of the raiders and downed the horse of another. It was lucky shooting on my part. I hit a second man, and he dropped. The others pulled off then, and didn't come back. When I was sure they were gone, I went over to the fallen man. My shot had caught him in the chest, and he was dying."

He paused again, but Kate said nothing.

"I removed the neckerchief mask from his face. It was Clint Pierson. He didn't last long—no longer than it took him to say a few words—to name the men who had been with him. I packed his body back to Garrison, for burial. I sent Dick on to Carson with the gold, and with a message to the U. S. marshal." He looked at her and said slowly: "That's how it was, Kate. Clint Pierson gambled for gold and lost his life, and it was my shot that killed him."

"But you're not sure whether you used a carbine or a six-gun," Kate said. She shook her head. "No, I don't believe it was like that. If Clint was one of a wild bunch and gave you the names of the others, why haven't you done something about them? Folks in Garrison say that you refused to name those others and organize a posse to hunt them down."

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"Kate, I don't believe in vigilante law and lynchings. When the U. S. marshal shows up, I'll name the men who were with Pierson and he can hunt them down." Jim took a step nearer her. "I know what you're thinking—what all of Garrison town is thinking. You believe that I tricked Pierson into riding out to Red Dog Canyon to kill him. You believe I killed him because of you."

"You quarreled with him, right after I'd left for Frisco."

"So you heard about that," Jim said. It was something he'd all but forgotten. The quarrel had taken place in a Garrison honkatonk, just after Kate had gone to Frisco to visit her married sister and to shop for her trousseau. The dudish Clint Pierson had been playing up to one of the honkatonk girls, and, because of his concern for Kate, Jim had called the man down.

Pierson had been a little drunk, and he had turned ugly. Blows were struck, after bitter words. . . . The whole town had learned of the argument, and gossip had it that the two men had fought over Kate Harvey. Now Jim could only say: "Yes, Kate, I quarreled with him."

"And later you killed him," she accused bitterly. "You took his life!"

"Kate, you've got to believe me—"

Dick Harvey's voice broke in. "Sis, don't blame Jim for what happened. He didn't know that Clint—"

Jim whirled on him. "Keep out of this!" he said angrily.

Kate turned in the saddle to look at her brother. She started to say: "Dick, tell me the truth. . . ." But her words were lost in a gasp. She swayed, then slumped sideways, and only Jim's reaching arms kept her from falling to the snow. She was limp in his arms, and her sudden pallor, along with her closed eyes, frightened both men. Jim kicked open the cabin door and carried her inside, shouting for Dick to come along.

Jim lay Kate on his bunk, at a loss for what to do. Her breathing was fluttery, and she remained limp and still. He unbuttoned her coat, loosened her shirt collar, so that her breathing was easier, then he removed her gloves and found her hands like ice. Alarmed, he turned and built up the fire with new logs and brought out a bottle of brandy, spilling a little of the liquor into a tin cup. He forced some of the brandy between Kate's lips, and she choked a little and her eyes opened. She gazed at him dully, then turned her face to the wall.

"She's your sister, Dick," Jim said. "You'll have to look after her."

Nearly half an hour passed before Dick came from the cabin.

"Sis'll be all right now, Jim," he said. "She told me what's wrong. She hasn't eaten a square meal or slept right since the news reached her. She fainted from hunger, I guess. I got some food into her, and she's sleeping now. We'll get her back to town when she wakes up."

"You talked, Dick?"

"Not a word, Jim. But I should."

Jim shook his head. "The truth would hurt her all the more," he declared. He hesitated, then he said:

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"You take the string out, amigo, and head for Virginia City. Pick up a shipment of blasting powder and mining tools at Randell's warehouse, and take it to Dunlap & Ward's store at Garrison."

"You want me away from Kate?"

"It's best," Jim told him. "You're too easy to see through, bucko."

He kept thinking that later, when Dick was mounted and hazing the half dozen mules along the trail to Virginia City. Dick Harvey was a man who could have no secrets from a woman close to him. Kate would begin to wonder and to ask questions, and in the end she would learn that her brother, and not Jim Drumgold, had killed the man she was to have married.

Kate slept throughout the day, waking only when darkness came and Jim lighted the cabin oil lamp. He had watched over her during the day, stealing into the cabin to put an occasional log on the fire—and to look at her and marvel that she should be there in his bunk. When she roused herself and looked uncertainly about, Jim said: "Kate, will you eat here, or do you want to go home?"

She said nothing at all, but rose and found her coat and sombrero and gloves. Jim turned and went out to saddle the horses, and Kate was waiting in the darkness outside the cabin when he came leading her paint pony and his own gelding.

"I know the way," she said flatly. "I don't want you riding with me."

"I'm riding to Garrison, anyway," he told her.

She swung away as soon as she hit the saddle, but Jim caught up with her at the ferry. Once Hank had poled them across the Trumbolt, they followed the snow-blanketed road through the foothills. They reached Garrison in a silence that had not been broken once.

Garrison was more camp than town, for its largest buildings were mere jerry-built frame structures. Mostly, it was a hodge-podge of rickety shacks and huts, tents and lean-tos. There were few solid log cabins like the Harveys'.

The mining camp sprawled for more than a mile along a wide bend in the Trumbolt, and Kate's home was located on her father's poorly paying claim. The cabin was unlighted as Jim and the girl reined in.

"Looks like your pa's not home," said Jim. "You want me to stay with you until he gets back?"

"No."

"I'll put up your horse, at least."

"Don't bother," Kate told him.

She dismounted and led the paint back to the lean-to that served as a barn. Jim waited until she returned from saddling the animal, watching her and hurt by the way she continued to ignore him. Once inside, she lighted an oil lamp and then came back to the doorway.

"I suppose I should thank you for caring for me today," she said.

"No, Kate. All I want is for you to believe me."

"When that marshal comes, maybe I'll believe part of what you told me," she said flatly. "If he doesn't come, I'll know everything you said was a lie. But he'll hear about Clint

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Pierson's death, even if I have to travel to Carson to tell him!"

"That's up to you, Kate," Jim said. He swung into his saddle and rode away.

Ahead a scant half mile was Sam Coates' combination saloon, gambling parlor and dance hall. Its lighted windows were inviting, and the raucous music of a hurdy-gurdy reached out into the chill darkness. Suddenly in as much need of a drink as Dick Harvey had been of late, Jim swung over to the hitch rack and dismounted.

The big hall was stuffy with the heat of pot-bellied stoves and the warmth given off by the heavily clad bodies of many men. Coates always had a crowd at night. The long bar was lined up, the gambling tables busy, and the half dozen gaudily dressed women of the place were swirling in a dance with men from the diggings.

Making his way to the bar, Jim Drumgold felt staring eyes and half-hidden hostility. He had no doubt at all that most of the town, like Kate Harvey, believed he had tricked and killed Clint Pierson that night at Red Dog Canyon and that there had been no ambush at all. Even the bartender's voice was grudging as he said: "What's yours?"

Jim was slow in answering. He had looked into the back-bar mirror, and of all the faces reflected there, three stood out. Three hard-bitten faces—the faces of men long given to outlaw ways. They belonged to the men Clint Pierson had named with his dying breath, the Lanier brothers, Cal and Pete, and Russ Pegler.

The crowd dismissed Jim Drumgold and returned to its shoddy pleasures, but Pegler and the Lanier brothers kept watching him, by way of the mirror, with all the wariness of a man eying a rattlesnake. The three were dividing a bottle, and they kept at their drinking without taking their eyes from the mirror. Jim said, "Whiskey," to the bartender and paid for his drink with a pinch of dust from his poke. Downing the drink, Jim took out and filled his pipe. He took his gaze away from the glass while lighting up, and when he looked again, the three hard cases were moving away.

Jim put his back to the bar and watched the trio head for the door. Pete Lanier's left arm hung limp and Jim thought: *So it was Pete who was winged that night.* And once, again he marveled over the way young Dick Harvey could handle a six-gun.

The door closed behind Pegler and the Laniers, and Jim puffed at his pipe. He was worried. No longer was he sure that he had done right after the raid on his pack train. Perhaps he should have organized a citizens' posse and gathered in those three hard cases. But at the time he had remembered a lynching he had witnessed some years before at Aurora. Two men had been killed in capturing the suspected man, then, after the hanging, it had been found that the victim was wrongly accused. From that time on, Jim Drumgold believed that only men with the proper authority should hunt down law breakers.

He finished his pipe and another drink, then left and, mounting, took

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to the trail. He saw nothing of Russ Pegler and the Laniers, and he had no way of knowing if they had ridden for their hide-out in the hills—or if they had headed out the road he must travel, to set an ambush for him. He drew his pistol and rode with it in his hand.

Two miles out of town, he caught sight of a moving black patch against the snow's whiteness and after a moment he marked it for a horse. He reined in and waited. Nothing happened, but the night seemed alive with watching eyes. He swung his pistol up and fired two shots into a timber stand just ahead.

A spurt of gun flame pierced the thick darkness among the trees, and Jim heard the vicious whine of a slug.

He swung his horse off the road, lifting it with reins and spurs and voice, and the animal labored through drifted snow. Shots blasted behind him, but the combination of darkness, distance and sudden movement kept him from being targeted. He urged the black on, circling wide around the ambush trap. After a wild ten minutes, he breathed easy again. There was no pursuit.

The following day Rig Hasso and two drovers came up trail from Sacramento with two dozen pack mules. The outfit was bound for Garrison, but Hasso had a ton of freight consigned to Belle City, a small camp east through the mountains, and, not wishing to swing east, he offered Jim Drumgold a deal. There was profit in it, so Jim transferred the goods to some of his own mules and headed for Belle.

Snowslides blocked portions of the trail, and it took Jim two days to reach the camp. But he made the return trip in a day, reaching his place on the Trumbolt just after nightfall when the wind was lifting and there was a feel of more snow in the air. He found old Hank Mitchum in a state of excitement.

"Something blamed queer's going on," Hank told him. "Dick didn't show up today like he should've, and then just before dark a prospector came in with Dick's string of mules—every critter under pack. This feller claimed he came on them in Red Dog Canyon, with nobody guarding them. He read their brand marks, and knew where they belonged."

A sudden knotted feeling lay inside Jim Drumgold.

"I told the prospector you'd pay him to haze the string into Garrison, to Dunlap & Ward's store," Hank went on. "Which he did. He claimed that he'd cut for sign in the snow, at Red Dog, and it looked to him as though Dick had met somebody he knew, and the two of them rode off toward Virginia City. Jim, that young bucko ain't to be trusted."

Jim nodded agreement. In one way, he was relieved. For a moment he had visualized Dick Harvey riddled by ambush guns and sprawled in the snow. But it seemed that Dick had merely grown tired of his job.

Hank Mitchum said, "Another thing, Jim. That lawman you been waiting for showed up today. His name's Luke Hornell. When I told

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him you were out on the trail he rode on toward Garrison. Said he'd be back."

Jim went to his cabin, built a fire and rustled up a hot meal. The wind was howling outside now, and sleet was drumming against the one glazed window. He felt in low spirits, now that Dick had run out on him.

He was smoking his pipe by the roaring fire, and listening to the gathering storm outside, when a voice —Kate's voice—called his name. He rose and went to open for her, and the girl, already dismounted, came in without an invitation. She was breathless and she looked frightened.

"Jim, I had to come. . . ."

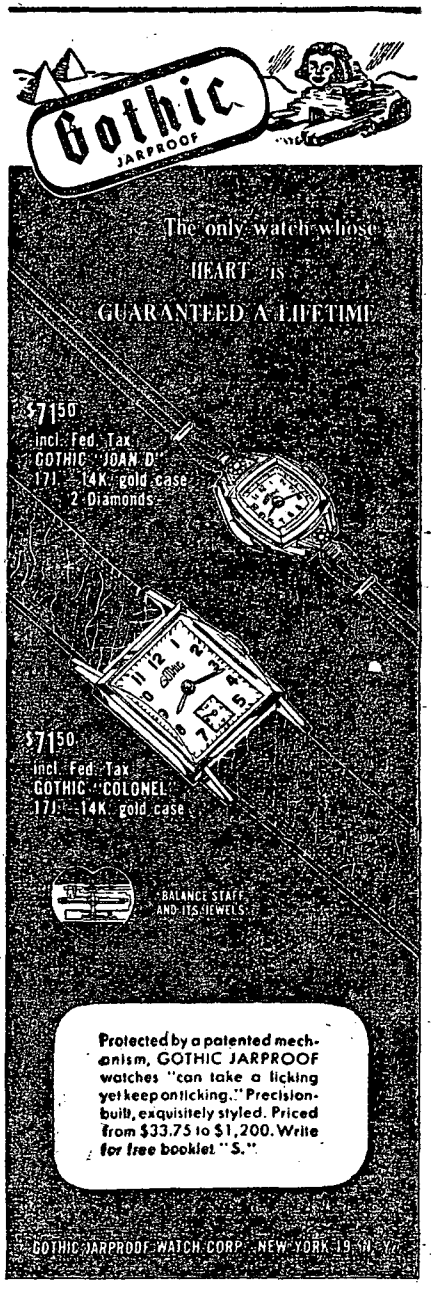
"Take it easy, Kate."

He stood with shoulders against the door, waiting for her to get a grip on herself.

"I've been a fool, Jim," she said, and there was a hint of hysteria in her voice. "I talked today with Luke Hornell, the U. S. deputy marshal, and I told him what I thought happened the night Clint Pierson was killed. But now I know different. Hornell made inquiries at Dunlap & Ward's store, where Clint was manager, and the new manager told him that Clint had left a shortage in the store's accounts. Hornell learned too that Clint had been gambling and losing heavily . . . and that he had been giving money to a girl at Sam Coates' place. I guess, Jim, that Clint wasn't the man I thought."

"You didn't need to come here to tell me this, Kate."

"No. Something else brought me," Kate went on. "Tonight, just



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after dark, a rider came to the house and called me to the door. It was one of those tough Laniers, Jim. He told me to come here and tell you that I'd never see Dick again, if you talked to the law about what happened that night in Red Dog Canyon. Jim, do you suppose . . ."

Jim was jolted. He had been wrong. Dick Harvey hadn't met a friend on the trail and ridden off to Virginia City. One of the Laniers or Russ Pegler had been waiting along the trail and had caught Dick off guard. With a gun at his back, Dick had been forced to abandon the pack animals. And the wild bunch, aware that Luke Hornell was at Garrison, were holding Dick as a hostage to scare Jim Drumgold into silence.

"Jim, where's Dick?" Kate asked, her voice rising.

"Safe, for the time being," Jim lied.

"You'll not talk to that deputy marshal when he comes here?"

"I won't be here when he comes, Kate. I'm going after Dick."

He wasted no time, and the girl's alarmed eyes followed him about the cabin. He gathered together a blanket bedroll, his six-gun and a saddle carbine, filled his coat pockets with cartridges. From a corner of the room, he took a pair of snowshoes. He pulled on a fur-lined coat and wrapped a woolen muffler about his neck. He made a shoulder pack of his bedroll, took up snowshoes and carbine, and moved to the door.

"No use lying to you, Kate," he said. "That wild bunch is holding Dick prisoner. They think nobody knows where they hide out, but I've been back in the hills and I know. I'm heading for there."

"Jim, I'll go with you!"

"No. You ride back home," he said. "Wait until morning, and if Dick doesn't come, you go to Hornell and tell him that Clint Pierson's partners the night of the raid were Russ Pegler and Cal and Pete Lanier. Tell him they're holed up at Ute Squaw Canyon. But don't tell him unless Dick fails to show up. I may have to bargain with them—Dick's life for my silence. You understand, Kate?"

He caught her nod, heard her say: "Jim, I'm terribly sorry . . ."

But he didn't wait to hear the rest of her words. He opened the door and plunged out into the night that was rapidly turning into cold, murky white hell. A blizzard was breaking.

By using snowshoes, Jim could travel directly over the hills where the unbroken snow would bog down a horse. And by crossing the hills, where no trail existed, except an uncertain one from Garrison, he could reach Ute Squaw Canyon with some hope of taking the outlaws by surprise. But the hide-out lay nine miles away, over the worst sort of terrain, and Jim had to fight the snowstorm every foot of the way.

It was from the start a nightmarish trek, for there was no seeing through the murky whiteness. Jim plodded on, finding his way more by instinct than by sight, and he lost count of the times he fell sprawling and of the narrow escapes he had from snowslides down the slopes of rocky cliffs. Fear traveled with him.

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and he knew that a broken leg in a fall would mean a lingering death. Yet his real fear was for Dick Harvey. It was his fear for Dick that kept him pushing on until, close to midnight, he broke from timber and from the top of a snow slope looked down upon the outlaw hide-out.

The wild bunch had a ramshackle log cabin, there in narrow Ute Squaw Canyon. There was a lean-to shelter at the rear for their horses. A great pine tree stood just behind the cabin. No light showed from the log shack as Jim slowly and warily worked his way down the slope, but red sparks flying from the stone chimney showed that a wood fire blazed within. Midway down slope, Jim halted to remove the snowshoes and to make sure his carbine was loaded. Then a dog began to bark.

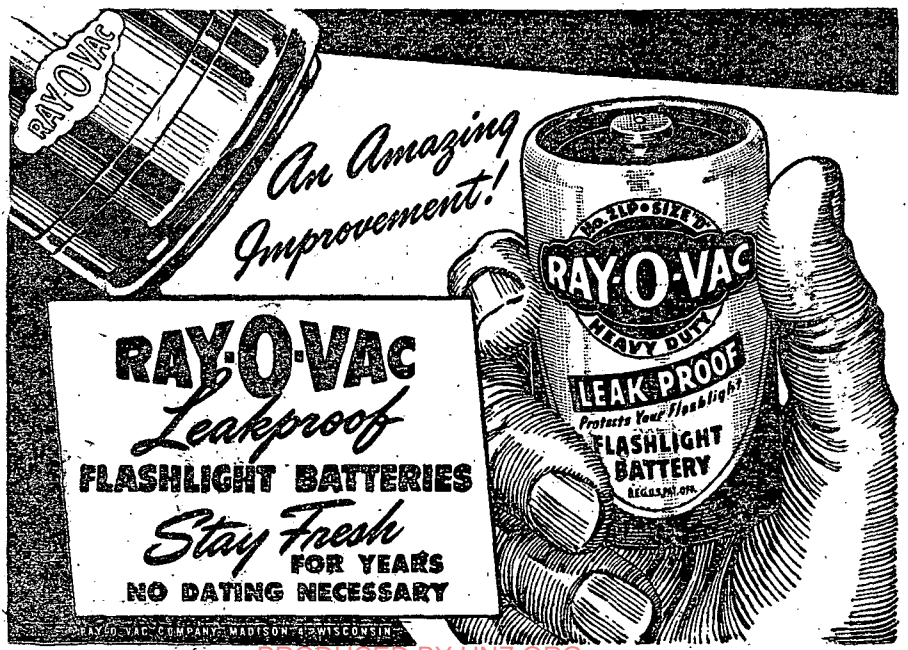
The animal did not appear, and Jim judged that it was chained somewhere, perhaps within the lean-to. The barking continued, and finally a man came from the cabin. By the squat build of the man, who could be dimly seen through the swirling snow, Jim knew him to be Russ Pegler.

The outlaw peered about, one way and other, and finally, on seeing nothing, started toward the lean-to with the idea, Jim guessed, of turning the dog loose. Raising his carbine, Jim called out: "Hold up, Pegler—I've got you covered!"

The outlaw halted, flung up his arms, and yelled above the howl of the storm, "That you, Drumgold?"

"That's right, Pegler. I've come for young Harvey."

"You've come for nothing, hom-



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bre," Pegler said, and his voice had the odd forced sound of a man who is not good at lying. "He's hidden where he'll not be found until that lawman leaves these parts. You talk to that deputy marshal, Drumgold?"

"Not yet," Jim answered. "I came to bargain with you, first. Hand over Harvey, and I'll keep quiet about you and the Laniers until you've had time to leave these parts. After that, you'll have a good chance to cover your tracks. My word on it, Pegler!"

The outlaw might have agreed to such a bargain, but one of the Lanier brothers fired a shot from the cabin doorway. Jim was not hit, but he dropped flat to escape a second shot, and then he saw that he had lost the game's first trick. Russ Pegler had darted for the cabin doorway, and now was safe inside. Angered, Jim fired two quick shots at the closing door. Then, realizing that he might hit Dick Harvey, he held his fire. A moment passed, and then Pegler's voice reached out to taunt him.

"Come and get Harvey," the outlaw shouted. "Why, you fool, you're as good as dead! If our guns don't get you, the cold will!"

A gun spurted flame, and Jim dived for the shelter of a fallen tree. He lay low behind the thick trunk, as outlaw bullets slapped into it, and he knew he blundered. The dog, he thought, had given him away. The animal was still snarling, and the horses in the lean-to were spooked into adding to the din.

Jim felt the cold bite into him, now that he had stopped moving, and he had no doubt but that Russ Pegler was right. Even if he kept the cabin beseiged, he would still lose out. The cold would freeze him to death, while he lay in wait. Already his hands and feet felt numb, and his face ached from the frigid air. For an instant, he considered hitting the trail to Garrison for help. But that would mean leaving Dick to be murdered? He knew the outlaws would not be at their hide-out when he returned with Luke Hornell. They were holed up now only because his carbine commanded the cabin door.

It was warm in that cabin. Jim could see the sparks fly up from the chimney. He watched those short-lived sparks, strangely fascinated. The firing from the cabin was infrequent now, but the outlaws were surely waiting for him to expose himself. They would riddle him, then, and kill Dick Harvey. They would bury the two of them in some hidden place, and so feel safe.

A fresh log must have been thrown on the cabin fire, for a great shower of sparks puffed from the chimney. Those sparks, that chimney. . . . The idea worked through the despair in Jim Drumgold's mind.

He began crawling over the snow, along the fallen pine. He reached its end and leapt up and moved forward at a stumbling run. A gun blasted twice, but now he was out of reach. The cabin had no windows; it was blind on three sides. Jim worked down the slope, laboring through great drifts. When he passed by the rear of the lean-to, the chained dog went wild.

He came to the pine that grew al-

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most against the rear of the cabin, caught hold of a limb, and drew himself up. The flat roof groaned as he trusted his weight to it, but he worked his way to the chimney that spewed out smoke and fiery sparks. It took but an instant to slip off the pack straps that held his bedroll and to wedge the blankets into the narrow chimney mouth. . . .

Now he had but to wait, and trust to luck.

It did not take long. Men began to cough and to curse within the cabin. Lowering himself from the roof, Jim worked around to a clump of scrub pines and brush to the west of the cabin. He was no more than thirty feet from the door, behind which the outlaws—and no doubt Dick Harvey too—were choking on the smoke which filled the cabin now that the chimney was blocked. The door was closed, for Pegler and the Laniers, having lost sight of their enemy, feared to expose themselves.

"You, Pegler! You hear me?" Jim shouted. "Send Dick Harvey out!"

A wild cursing lifted, but the door opened part way. And Pegler's voice said, in a strangled way: "All right, Drumgold, you win. We're letting Harvey come out."

The door closed, and Jim could hear the men inside coughing. It was a long wait, but finally the door swung open and a man came lurching out. Jim recognized Dick's broad-brimmed and flat-crowned white sombrero, a Texas hat.

"This way, Dick—fast!" he shouted.

The white-hatted man swung

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toward him, and Jim stiffened as he saw that it was Cal Lanier, not Dick Harvey. The outlaw's six-gun blasted, and the blow of the slug, catching Jim in the left thigh, dropped him to his knees. But he fired the carbine as he went down, and Cal Lanier fell with only a gasp.

Two other men—Russ Pegler and Pete Lanier—emerged and opened fire. Jim's carbine roared again, and Pegler screamed as he dropped. Pete Lanier tripped over Pegler's body, and went sprawling. Jim held his fire, and shouted, "Get up without your gun, Pete. Easy!"

Pete Lanier obeyed, but panic had hold of him. He turned and ran wildly, vanishing into the raging blizzard. Inside the cabin, Dick was shouting. Jim painfully dragged himself in, for his wounded leg wouldn't support him. Dick lay tied up, bloody and bruised from a beating, in a corner of the shack. He was still choking on smoke.

It was two hours later—after Dick was freed and had climbed to the cabin roof to clear the chimney, after he'd lighted a candle and bandaged Jim Drumgold's leg wound—that riders came through the stormy night. There were a dozen men in the bunch, a posse that had been sworn in by Luke Hornell when Kate Harvey returned to Garrison and told him where Jim had gone. Fortunately, as it turned out, Kate had not waited until morning, as Jim had instructed.

Once the U. S. deputy marshal, a burly man with steely eyes, talked with Jim Drumgold and Dick Harvey, he led his posse in a search for Pete Lanier—and caught the outlaw wandering about through the storm. But one of the posse stayed behind and timidly entered the cabin, to stand looking at Jim as he nursed his hurt leg by the roaring fire.

"Jim. . . ."

"Kate!" he cried, startled. "You *here?*"

"Did you think I could stay behind, safe in town, while Dick and you were in danger?" Kate shook her head. She still wore her mannish range duds, the Texas clothes she and her brother fancied. "I couldn't, Jim. I've just talked with Dick, outside, and now I know who killed Clint Pierson. Jim, why did you want to take the blame—if blame it is?"

"Dick's your brother," Jim explained. "I was afraid you might hate him, if you knew that he was with me that night and that it was his shot that killed Pierson. I figured since I meant nothing to you—"

"Don't say that," Kate cried, coming toward him. "I must have been blind. I saw a lot of things in Clint Pierson that weren't there, while you, Jim, possess all the qualities a girl hopes to find in a man. But now . . . now my eyes are open."

True, her eyes were open—and full of promise for Jim Drumgold. They told him that he hadn't gone through a night of hell for nothing. He felt a stab of pain, from the wound in his thigh, which needed a medico's care, but he smiled in spite of it. And Kate Harvey smiled back at him.

THE END

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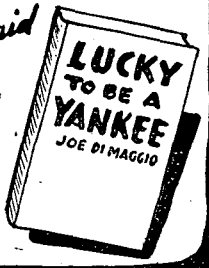

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